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「虚惑星の魔法使い」
上巻
星空めてお
イラスト BUNBUN
ファイヤーガール
FIRE GIRL

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CHARACTER
ファイマ・ガル
kamikona sachi
kujou arie
fujimori chiharu
amemi
misasagi touya
kuya takumi
hinooka homura

[Nutella]
Official Name: Imaginary Earth
A planet discovered through the predictions of mathematician Dr. Chandler.
It has wide oceans and continents, and boasts 100 satellites and an asteroid ring like Saturn.
Its surface area is a 120 times its own mass, though the vastness is almost equal to that of Jupiter.
Investigators from many countries have found several ruins there, but haven't reported contact with any intelligent lifeforms yet.
~ Published Report from the United Nations Discovering Imaginary Earth Program (UNPIEP)~

When Homura sat down beside Touya, Misasagi belatedly brought her a plain paper carton that she took out from the refrigerator.
"This is... to celebrate Hinooka-san's entry into the club, meager as it may be."
"Oh, Misasagi's apple pie. It's been a while since you last made it," said Fujimori.
"Yes."
"Wow, thank you so much. It looks delicious!"
"It's a recipe I'm proud, of."
—From Chapter 9

Homura and the others finally departed
the old fortress that served as their base camp.
"My first mission... My first expedition...!"
Looking up at the sun high in the sky and
the white rings which surrounded the Imaginary
Earth, Homura was filled with enthusiasm.
—From Chapter 11

Credits

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Chapter 1

"Kujou-san, Kujou-san."

It was right when school ended for the day.

In the empty entranceway, a girl threw her indoor shoes into the shoe rack and hurriedly chased after someone.

"Want to go home together?"

"No."

"Come on. Don't. Say. That~"

The girl called out while jumping down the front steps, but the other person didn't stop.

"The only one who doesn't do club activities besides me is you, Kujou-san."

"So?"

Kujou Orie turned around expressionlessly.

"I decided that I wouldn't do club activities the moment I entered this school. Shouldn't you enter some club yourself?"

"Eeeh…?"

The girl's shoulders drooped in response, causing Kujou-san to develop a twitch on her forehead.

Kujou-san turned on her heels and began walking towards the school gate. The girl in question chased after her, looking like a dog in the process.

"You hung out with me last week, though."

"I hate how boys gather around when I'm with you even though they have no business with us."

"Come on, it's not so bad."

"I said no."

"No way~. How mean. We both came here from Otowa Middle School, didn't we? We're comrades and friends, right?"

"Friends?"

Kujou-san finally came to a stop beneath the tall and imposing tree that stood beside the school gate.

The discordant musical performance of the school's brass band could be heard riding upon the winds.

"In the first place, the two of us haven't talked much."

"…We haven't?"

The way the girl tilted her forehead in puzzlement made Kujou-san's forehead twitch even more.

"You were in classes 1-3, 2-3 and 3-2 during your three years at Otoha. Do you remember which I was in each year?"

"Come on, we were in the same class in our last year, right? Before that… Err, sorry, I forgot."

"We were in the same class. For all three years."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously… Wait, you're really not joking here, are you? Unbelievable."

Kujou-san despondently placed a hand on her forehead.

"Hinooka-san. You hardly know anything about me, but I understand what kind of person you are very well."

"Could it be that you hate me?"

"It's not that I hate you, but—"

Kujou-san put her hands on her hips and sighed.

"—I don't really like you either. You and I simply don't suit each other."

"You really like to put it bluntly, Kujou-san. Heeh~"

The girl responded in admiration.

Perhaps because it was such an unexpected reply, Kujou-san faltered, but then resumed speaking with a severe gaze.

"You chatter all the time, but you never speak of anything real. For me, that kind of thing is—"

"Like wasting time at a book sale for the entirety of your day off?"

"What on earth's that?"

"A waste of human life."

"Perhaps so."

Kujou Orie then departed, leaving the girl standing alone at the school gate.

The tall boys of the Rugby club raised their voices in tandem as they returned from their running session. They all glanced at the girl as they passed by. She smiled back at them.

And once she was alone once more, her smile quickly fell.

"I see."

She lifted up her expensive-looking bag over her shoulder.

"Fine then."

She went out onto the roadway through the school gate and began walking in the exact opposite direction of her usual route.

There was indeed a station in that direction as well. There was, but the road was tight due to being laid around a cliff ridge, and there weren't any convenience stores along it, making the route unpopular with students. This evening as well, there was some car traffic, but no pedestrians on the sidewalk at all.

The verdant forest alongside the road had just about reached the point where the trees needed to be trimmed.

Before she had walked even a hundred meters up the gently-sloping hill, Homura started grumbling to herself.

"How dull."

That's right.

"Ah, so irritating."

Hinooka Homura felt dull and listless.

The idea of participating in a club that would merely tire her out was absurd.

On the other hand, she couldn't stand the thought of showing the world her lonely figure as she walked home alone. At Seiran High School, the student club participation rate was nearly 100% despite the lack of compulsion to join one from the school administration. Both the sports clubs and cultural clubs were exceedingly active and vigorous. As expected of the number one university-preparatory high school in the prefecture.

"'How about getting fruit tarts at a café in Honmachi?' and there we go."

She typed out a text message on her cell phone.

Her bag felt heavy as it swayed on her arm.

Is there anyone I can press into coming? she thought while meaninglessly surveying her surroundings. At that moment, a bicycle with a thin wire-like frame and its rider passed by.

That's our school's male uniform.

The bicycle circled back in a U-turn and then braked right in front of Homura. It was quite a sudden braking maneuver, causing her to be slightly taken aback.

"Hinooka?"

Homura nodded. Without being conscious of it, she returned to holding her bag like a proper lady.

"I'm Touya! From Class C. Ah, among the first years, I mean!"

She could tell at a glance. This was her first time talking to this boy.

Her eyes were suddenly drawn towards the handle of his bicycle.

His two arms peeked out from the short sleeves of the summer uniform that people had recently changed into for the season. He had tight muscles that resembled twisted and bundled wires. It didn't suit his childish-looking face at all. His glasses also felt unnatural on him somehow.

Jumping off the bike saddle like a vaulting competitor, the boy once more tried to confirm her name.

"You're Hinooka Homure from Class 1-A, right?"

"It's Homura, not Homure. Hinooka Homura."

"Ah, sorry. Homura, huh? What an interesting name."

The male student looked closely at Homura and nodded as if impressed.

"What?"

"I've heard that you're easy to identify since you're the cutest girl at school, but it really is true. You looked like someone straight from a movie scene when I saw you walking there."

"I was just walking normally. Just what kind of scene were you thinking of?"

"Like the scene of a girl after being dumped."

"……"

He said that without trying to hide his embarrassment. Was this guy courageous or a natural airhead?

It wasn't rare for her to be called out to like this, and she had often been flattered with even more frivolous words.

It would make things easier for her if she could get him to let her ride his bike the rest of the way home, though.

"…So, Touya-kun. Do you have some business with me?"

"The truth is, I'm here to invite you to my club. I'm in the Exploration Club."

"The Exploration Club? There's a club like that?"

"There is. There are only two club members right now, though."

"Just two? Even counting you?"

Touya nodded.

That explained why a mere first-year boy like him was going around inviting others to join the club.

"You're part of the go-home club, right, Hinooka?"

"That's true, but there's another girl not in any club within my class if you're looking for one."

"No, it has to be you."

"Has to be?"

Let alone forceful, his words were pretty much incomprehensible.

He had gone as far as to purposefully chase after her, though, so she understood that he was desperate.

"I have no intention of joining any club, but… can I at least hear your reason for asking me?"

"Our club only has two—"

"Yes, I heard that. Not that, I mean, why me?"

The boy scratched his head with an expression of confusion.

Homura was the one who was baffled here. But, without paying that any mind, Touya came close and placed his hands on her shoulders.

"It's because you're a Mage, isn't that obvious?"

Magic?

…What in the heck is this guy talking about?

"Say that one more time."

"We want a Mage in our Exploration Club."

A Mage?

Homura resisted the urge to cradle her head. This conversation seemed right out of a manga, after all. It would have been more realistic if he were inviting her to join the Self-Defense Force.

"You're talking about some game, right?"

"That's what you'd normally think. But this isn't about a game. It's real."

"You're aware that you're saying something strange, right?"

"Yeah."

Touya finally lost his serious face and burst out laughing.

"But, you know, the Exploration Club is fun! I think you'll like it too, Hinooka."

He slapped her shoulder heartily as he spoke.

On what basis was he saying that?

Homura's impression that university-preparatory high schools were filled with nothing but eccentrics was further strengthened.

Touya took something out from his rucksack.

"This is our club's pamphlet. It doesn't seem like you'll decide right now, so please read it later."

As if there's anything to decide! …Holding herself back from saying that out loud, Homura accepted the extremely thick pamphlet. She supposed that a club of only two people could at least manage to make a full-blown pamphlet like this—

"Please read it and think about it. I'll come ask you again tomorrow."

"T-Tomorrow? Hey, wait!"

Touya turned back to face her, after having already returned to his bicycle and hopped back on the saddle.

Homura hesitantly pointed at the bicycle.

"Give me a lift."

"I'm heading back to school. You can hop on if you're fine with that."

Now that Homura looked closely, the bicycle had no luggage rack, and she would have to ride standing up if she got on.

"In the first place, you're heading home by Oujidou station? That's unusual. This road is quite rough. I just came back from looking for you in the direction of Higakubo station."

"I just decided to go home this way on a whim today."

"Well, that's fine. See you tomorrow, then."

"Yes, goodbye."

Homura despondently watched Touya leave while nimbly riding his bicycle.

After that, she ended up taking the wrong path, and it took her a full fifty minutes to reach the station by foot.

Just as the train home slipped into the station, Homura received the long-awaited reply to her earlier text.

She flipped open her phone while walking to the train platform.

If she were to return to Honmachi station from here to go to the café, she would need to go to the opposite platform up the stairs, but it wouldn't cost her much time.

But Homura's expression, which had slackened in expectation, hardened in the face of the reply's contents.

'Sorry. I can't go out and play for a while. I'll make up for it next time. Really sorry.'

"…Next time…"

She couldn't even count on her friend from her middle school days, who now went to another school.

No, that's not it. Maybe I've just been abandoned.

When she left the local station's ticket gate, the usual woman was handing out leaflets there. She wore a light blue summer sweater covered in lint. Homura passed by while ignoring her.

After she arrived home, she changed into her house clothes and lay limply on her bed in an attempt to become one with it.

Soon after, there was a knock on her door.

"Homura?"

Even when the door opened, Homura didn't budge from her prostate position.

"There was a phone call from your boyfriend earlier."

Homura mumbled something into her pillow, but her words were most likely nothing intelligible.

While looking amazed at the sight of this gelatinous life-form, the girl who had entered the room continued speaking.

"He said something about being sorry and wanting to break up? Even though I told him he had the wrong person on the phone, he didn't listen to me at all."

The second daughter of the Hinooka family, Homura's younger sister Tsuyu, was often mistaken for her sister due to their similar voices.

"Rather, why did you tell him our home number? Could you cut that out? I'm always the one who answers the phone here. Hey, are you listening?"

"Hrmm."

The amorphous older sister turned a small portion of her resigned face towards her younger sister.

As usual, Tsuyu was leaning her glasses against the door while wearing an annoyed expression.

"I already broke up with that guy."

"Hmph."

The younger sister folded her arms and snorted.

"It didn't look like you two were going out, though. Didn't you just get him to help you with your studying?"

"Hrmm…"

It was exactly as her sister said.

Once the tumultuous results announcement from the high school entrance exams had passed, he had been the one to indirectly bring up the topic of breaking up.

It'd be nice if we went to the same school together. It wasn't as if she had believed in such a dream-like conclusion, though. She had merely been happy at soaking in the mood of 'sharing the same goal'.

But, as if due to some mistake, Homura, who had been tutored, was accepted into her target school, while he, the tutor, failed the entrance exams.

Apparently, there were types who were frequently in the top ranks of the mock exams with excellent results, but were weak when it came to the real thing.

"You used someone once again, didn't you?"

"That's not—"

"Ah, how sad. Haven't all the guys who dated you ended up with misfortune?"

"……"

Homura couldn't deny it.

Thinking back, it had been a relationship tied together only through studying for the test.

She hated being apologized to as if she were the victim and he the wrongdoer, so she had simply ignored his text messages a few times.

Her former boyfriend was well aware of her academic skill level, and understood quite well how ill-suited she was to the studying environment of her current school.

"Are you just going to leave things hanging vaguely again? You need to clearly own up to your own mistake. That guy feels responsible, you know."

"Shut up already… you regular customer at the behind-the-curtain section at Tsutaya[1]."

"What the heck's that?"

"An inexperienced girl with superficial knowledge."

The younger sister merely shrugged.

"Dinner will be ready in a bit, so don't go to sleep and come downstairs."

"Ugh."

The younger sister left the room to head downstairs. Homura's bag tumbled onto the floor.

Speaking of which, she had thrown the pamphlet she'd received in there.

She tried reaching for it while lying face-down, but couldn't reach it at all.

After a little while, she noisily kicked her legs against the bed, but she immediately remembered the abuse she had placed on them from the long walk home and brought them to a stop.

"Next, Hinooka."

The next day at school.

The current class was Classical Literature, or, rather, Modern Japanese.

The classroom was pretty calm, but Homura could feel the attention of the other students concentrate on her.

Sweat poured down Homura's hand as she stood up with her textbook in hand.

She rewound her mental recorder and repeated the teacher's question to herself.

It was about a certain trifling poem.

"Chieko says that there is no sky in Tokyo[2]."

"That's right, that one."

The female teacher clapped her hand against the rolled-up textbook she held.

"Chieko is mentally ill. Of course there's a sky in Tokyo. So, just what is Chieko saying here?"

"…She wanted to see the sky above Mount Atatara."

"This poem's author is saying that this is the true sky for Chieko. It's dubious whether Chieko herself was speaking cogently. Now then, why don't you try thinking of Chieko's feelings?"

The female teacher lightly sat down at her desk and crossed her legs. Her manners were quite bad.

She wore tight indigo-blue jeans.

"Is Chieko simply a selfish woman? What do you think?"

The author had already given an answer, wasn't that enough?

What was this teacher doing, enquiring them all about it?

"…Chieko has a lot of strong memories about Mount Atatara, so, I think she wanted to see the sky of that mountain again."

"Hmm. In other words?"

In other words? In other words?

"She wanted to climb Mount Atatara…"

Low laughter trickled out within the classroom, making Homura's ears burn red.

"Perhaps so. Perhaps not. We don't know the truth of the matter. There's another poem where Mount Atatara comes up. Let's try reading that one next—"

The teacher indicated for Homura to sit down with a gesture.

Feeling like she wanted to disappear, Homura sat back down in her chair.

Lunch time.

Homura indirectly questioned the classmates around her desk.

"The Exploration Club? You joined the Exploration Club, Hinooka-san?"

"Err, no. I was invited to join since I'm not in any club. Do you know anything about it?"

"Hmm… I only know what was written about it in the school guide."

"Yeah."

Her classmates wracked their memories while eating their respective boxed lunches and bread.

"If I remember right, the Exploration Club was formed three years ago."

"Three years? That's still pretty new."

"I haven't heard many good rumors about it."

"Oh?"

"It doesn't give any advantages to preparing for university either."

"True. The club activities consist of [exploration], after all."

"My club's advisor was grumbling about how it has the biggest club budget in the school. Look there."

One of her classmates pointed outside the window.

Homura turned around in her seat to look out at the schoolyard.

"The buildings beside the track field there belong to the sports clubs. And there's a rough-looking building just a little ways beyond that, see there?"

"That building that's closest to the mountain side? Eh, you don't mean…"

"That's right. That huge mansion is solely the Exploration Club's club building. Compared to that, my clubroom is like a storage closet."

"Now I kinda want to go inside~"

"No way, no way. The place is obviously secured by Secom[3]. Their security is quite strict, after all."

The two-story building, which had an astronomical observation dome on its rooftop, looked a bit like a research facility.

Homura had thought for sure that it was a public facility that opened on the weekend or something.

"In the first place, there's that too, you know? You need certain qualifications to join the Exploration Club. Hinooka-san, do you have the qualifications?"

Homura shook her head, hearing about this matter of qualifications for the first time.

"Touya-kun didn't say anything about that…"

One of her classmates widened her eyes and leaned forward with great interest.

"By Touya, you mean Touya Takumi? He's from the same middle school as me. Heeh, so he joined the exploration club. That's unexpected."

"Why?"

"He was in the kendo club in middle school. He was super strong. He used two-swords-style. He even participated in the inter-middle school tournaments."

"T-Two swords?"

It was completely different from Homura's mental image of kendo.

"He might suit you, Hinooka-san. Well, he's a bit short, though."

"Isn't that fine? How about you try joining the Exploration club, then?"

"Eh…?"

Now that she was being encouraged by those around her, Homura finally felt interested in joining.

But how many times before had she made a mistake in that way?

Homura gave a smile that only reached her face and cut apart a piece of fried chicken with the tips of her chopsticks.

"But something like the Exploration Club really doesn't suit me. And I don't have any particular qualifications either…"

"Hmm, that's true."

Thus, the topic of the Exploration Club reached a pause and the conversation changed to the subject of a foreign drama.

It was a show that Homura hadn't heard of before, and it was a political drama at that. She didn't understand what was amusing about it at all, but she decided to simply laugh along as if she understood. It tired her out.

The heavy gelatinous substance known as boredom and alienation weighed down upon her.

If the classroom weren't a public area, she would have immediately turned into an amorphous life-form and dissolved away starting from the tips of her feet.

"According to rumors, there's going to be some edict or other…"

"Huh?"

Homura's shoulders stiffened.

One of her classmates made an eye signal at her.

There was a boy looking around the classroom from the entrance.

"…Touya-kun."

"Yo, Hinooka!"

A voice resounded through the frigid classroom.

Pushed out by her lunch friends, Homura stood up from her seat with a long expression.

"Have you thought about your answer to my question yesterday?"

He greeted her like that without paying any regard to her classmates.

With a perfectly prim face, she pushed him back out into the corridor as quickly as her feet would carry her.

After they changed location to the front of a practically deserted special classroom, Touya asked her the same question once again.

"So?"

As he looked at her expectantly with a carefree expression, Homura made a small sigh.

"I'm going to ask a strange question, but…"

"Ah?"

The sky, which peeked through the window on the other side of the hallway, was pure blue and clear, the perfect example of an early summer day.

"Does joining the Exploration Club bring me any merits in regard to my school life?"

"Merits, huh?"

"Err, you know, that kind of thing. Excluding any reason like 'it's fun'."

"Let's see…"

Touya raised his head and looked up at the ceiling with his arms crossed.

"Hmm, well, since the club activities are definitely quite hard, we do get preferential treatment. I don't really care about it personally, though."

"Preferential treatment, like what?"

And then, he said something unbelievable.

"For instance, we don't get punished for being late or absent the day after we do club activities."

"Eh?"

The club activities were given priority over lessons?

Was that really all right?

"We also basically don't have to take any supplementary exams."

"N-No supplementary exams? Unconditionally?"

"Yeah. When we go all out in our club activities, we don't have the time for that kind of thing."

What a shock. That wasn't just preferential treatment; that was full-blown extraterritorial immunity.

Trembling in astonishment, Homura remembered the warning she'd been given just earlier.

"…But I heard that it doesn't have any benefits for advancing to university."

"Huh? What kind of club gives advantages for going to university? Our school mainly consists of sports clubs like track-and-field, rugby or wrestling. For girls, it tends to be volleyball or tennis. Do you want to do wrestling?"

"Why wrestling?"

While calming down her nerves which were easily ignited when faced with this bumpkin-like boy, Homura voiced a question that suddenly occurred to her.

"Did you come to this school on a sports recommendation, Touya-kun?"

"No, I took the normal entrance exams. Though I did consider that option too."

Homura let loose another sigh.

"You're quite smart, aren't you…?"

"What are you saying, that goes for you too, right?"

"Gefuh."

Homura choked as Touya whacked her back.

It was true that she had taken the normal entrance exams, but…

Homura hung her head and sat down while hugging her knees.

"Seems like it's a different than I thought."

"You see… that was like a one-time limited edition [Hinooka Homura-exclusive Spring Jumbo]…"

"What the heck's that?"

"Basically just a fluke. A coincidence."

"You passed on a fluke?"

Touya froze for just an instant.

"No, that's impossible. It's unusual for a public institution to have a mark sheet, but there's no way you could get in by coincidence."

"……"

"Eh, seriously?"

"Seriously," Homura mumbled, facing the floor.

"Then, how'd you do on the tests the other day?"

Her results on the midterm exams a few days ago had, of course, been terrible, and her blood had run cold in the face of her homeroom teacher and her parents.

Luckily, marks weren't publicly posted in the classroom here, but it was only a matter of time before her terrible grades became well-known within her class.

Afraid to speak it aloud, she traced out her average test results on the wall, causing Touya to freeze once more. This time, the pause lasted a short yet long three seconds.

"…Well, who cares? It's good that you got accepted here, at least."

"It's not good!"

Homura stood up in a swift motion to head-butt him, but Touya agilely dodged.

"In other words, I don't have the time for any club! It's taking all I have just to deal with the lessons here!"

"Ah, then there is merit in it for you."

"What?"

"You'll be all right if you join the Exploration Club."

"Why?"

"Based on your behavior, you didn't read the pamphlet I gave you yesterday, did you? Well, I also apologize for not properly explaining, then."

Touya crossed his arms in a confident manner.

"It's all right. If you become a Mage, something like studying will be easy for you."

"Are you trying to trick me here? Doesn't it sound like you're saying something like 'If you become a pro wrestler, a hundred squats will be a piece of cake'?"

"Yeah, wrestling really is great."

"Spare me."

Touya laughed in a carefree manner.

For some reason, I'm able to talk familiarly with him, thought Homura with a small sigh.

Was it because his height wasn't so different from hers? All of Homura's former boyfriends had been tall; or rather, that was the minimum condition for her to go out with someone.

"What do you do in the Exploration Club, Touya-kun?"

"Me? I'm still a fifth-ranked investigator, so I mostly follow senpai's lead. I've still only gone on two expeditions so far. There are a lot of things I have to remember."

"Hmm… Is your senpai strict?"

A two-person combo with a glasses-wearing bumpkin junior, in a certain sense, made the perfect picture.

She couldn't imagine adding herself to that group at all, though.

"She's kind."

But his voice matured at that moment, and he made a slightly sad expression.

Homura slightly revised her image of him as a bumpkin.

"I've yet to see her get angry."

"…You're the only junior in her club, after all. Maybe she's treating you preciously?"

"If you enter the club, there'll be two junior members and our activities will become more club-like, though."

"What should I do…?"

Homura laced her arms behind her neck and dropped against the wall.

"Were you also invited to join by that senpai, Touya-kun? Or did you just want to debut in the Exploration Club when you reached high school? I heard about how you did kendo before."

"You're quite knowledgeable, aren't you? I did enter the club on my own initiative. The reason I joined was…"

"Yeah?"

"……"

Touya froze with his mouth still partly open.

"Yeah?"

"…I'll tell you if you join."

"Hey, isn't that unfair? Are you really trying to invite someone to join here?"

Touya turned away from her and adjusted his glasses. Homura circled around to face him again and pressed him further.

"It can't be that you intend to suddenly drop out of the club if I join, can it?"

"Idiot, as if I'd do something like that."

"Idiot? You're calling the important person you're trying to invite an idiot?"

"I mean, you are an idiot, right?"

"Guh."

Touya spoke while scratching his head.

"I get it. If it's about your studies, I'll teach you. I'm not so good at teaching, but put up with it for now."

Homura was startled.

She knew it wasn't just her ears playing tricks on her due to the school bell ringing just now.

Homura recalled the words of her younger sister yesterday.

"…Is that all right?"

Touya closed his eyes as if resigned and nodded.

"I'm the one making a request of you here, after all."

"It's not a bother for you?"

"Not at all. Compared to club activities, that is."

Since Homura had yet to give a definite answer, the negotiations were put on hold for the time being. The two of them agreed to meet again after classes ended for the day and then returned to their respective classes.

But then, Touya, who had started walking away cheerfully, had his neck strangled.

"Ooff."

Turning around with teary eyes, Touya found Homura standing there, holding the collar of his shirt.

"…That hurt as much as being stabbed, you know."

"I just wanted to ask one last thing."

Indifferent to the disastrous scene she had brought about, Homura asked him.

"What's a Mage?"

"Read the pamphlet."

"We have an experiment next class, so I can't."

"…The truth is, I don't know either. Senpai just said that our club lacked someone with the position of Mage."

"That so? Then what about you, Touya-kun? You said something about being an investigator."

"Fifth-ranked investigator. My class is Light-Weight Warrior."

Homura burst into laughter.

"Warrior? Ahaha, that's just like a game."

"Like I said, it isn't a game."

"Hurry back to class," Touya told her as he shooed Homura away.

It seems Homura-san is thinking of something like an attacker or healer Mage from a video or board game. This is going to be hard going.

After school.

The two of them headed to the staff room together.

Compared to the refreshed Homura, Touya wore a long face for some reason.

"A personal inspection… huh…"

"Let me at least have a trial membership first. It's such a mysterious club, after all."

Completely shelving her studying deficiency, Homura spoke as if it were only natural.

"I wonder about that. Is that really all right…?"

"You really aren't flexible, are you?"

"Flexible, you say… Well, we can only try consulting with Mori-chan about it.

"Mori-chan?"

"The Exploration Club's advisor. —Pardon us!"

Touya politely and deeply bowed his head before he entered the staff room. Homura imitated him and followed him inside.

Within the staff room, which was one of the places she currently disliked the most, Homura felt as if all the teachers were staring at her, so she ducked her head as much as possible as she passed through.

Touya led her to a familiar-looking female teacher who was facing a pile of documents on her desk with a bitter expression.

"Sensei. It's Touya."

"Hmm~, hey."

Even after being addressed, the teacher fiddled with her bundled hair at the back of her neck with the back end of her pen while continuing to scowl at the documents.

"So Mori-chan is Fujimori-sensei," Homura softly muttered.

She was Fujimori, the one who was teaching Modern Japanese in Homura's class.

Even here in the staff room, her manners were so bad you wouldn't think she was a teacher, and the top of her desk looked to be the messiest in the room as well.

"Sensei, I've brought a new club member."

"I said I'd do a trial membership, remember?"

Suddenly looking up, the teacher's expression was filled with joyous expectation at those words.

But, the instant she saw Homura, her happiness faded away in the blink of an eye, and she returned to her original frown as if she were suffering from a toothache.

"…By club, you mean the Exploration Club?"

"Are you the advisor of any other club?"

Of course she wasn't.

"……"

After pressing the fingers of both her hands against her forehead for a while, Fujimori pointed at the staff roof's exit and got up from her chair.

Homura's eyes accidentally caught sight of a small framed picture that had been buried beneath the stacks of documents at that moment.

It was a black-and-white photo—and on it were neither her family, nor her lover, but Fujimori's younger self and a group of friends surrounding her.

As Homura pulled back her hair to get a better look, Touya pulled her away.

Fujimori led the two of them to the reception office next to the principal's office.

She was definitely using the room without permission.

"Shouldn't we talk in a classroom? Like, there's the matter of confidentiality and all that—"

"This place is fine. This won't take long."

Though Touya remained dubious, Fujimori urged them both to hurry up and sit.

The female teacher leaned back against a long sofa in the room, and then circled her arms sloppily around the back of a chair and crossed her legs, directly facing Homura. The atmosphere around her was more like a last boss in a game than a priest advising a pupil.

Fujimori stared at Homura, who was acting meek and quiet.

"…?"

Suddenly, Homura was hit by a sense of déjà vu. Naturally, this was a teacher who had stared at her countless times in class before. But still, she had quite a roundabout attitude.

And her bad manners were the same as always.

"Hinooka Homura, from Otowa Middle School. Of all the places, to think you chose to enroll here at Seiran High School."

"Sensei, is that the kind of attitude to take when greeting a new club member?"

When Touya admonished her with an amazed expression, Fujimori nodded as if to grouchily say she understood.

"…Huh…?"

Homura tilted her head slightly in confusion.

"I bring it up because that's where Mount Atatara is."

"…Guh… Don't talk about that…"

As Homura blushed in embarrassment, a sense of recollection rose up within her.

She slowly pulled up the faint memory.

"Umm… could it be that… we've met before, sensei?"

"I believe we have."

Fujimori boldly nodded.

"Were you her homeroom teacher? Or an acquaintance?"

Ignoring the puzzled Touya, Homura continued speaking.

"Err… Probably in middle school… during my second year's… physical… measurement…"

Fujimori gazed at Homura with half-lidded eyes.

While puzzled by the strange situation, Touya gave Homura a helping hand.

"Maybe you're referring to the aptitude test?"

"Was that it? Yeah, I think that's what it was called."

"That test isn't mandatory. Why didn't you remember it?"

"I'm in charge of the aptitude tests at Otowa Middle School."

"Yeah! I remember you there, sensei."

Homura clapped her hands happily.

However, Fujimori reclined back in her seat in an even more slovenly posture.

"That's not all."

"Eh?"

"After the test, I detained you and gave you a fiery speech. Ah, that's right. We were in a reception office like this after school back then as well."

"Sorry. I don't remember it well."

"Fufufufu."

Fujimori looked up at the ceiling as she became even sulkier.

Touya questioned her worriedly.

"Did she do something back then?"

"Touya. You just took the IE aptitude test the other day, right?"

"Ah, yeah. I enrolled through the entrance exams, after all."

"What was your score? Ah, don't worry about confidentiality and all that."

"Is that really all right?" Touya wondered with a little hesitation, but ultimately answered.

"My overall score was [45-C]."

"Hinooka Homura was [80-B]. Though that was from the first term of her second year of middle school."

"8…80!?"

Touya raised his voice in shock, and the person in question beside him completely misunderstood as she was immersed in excitement.

“Like I thought, I did meet sensei before~. I must not have noticed because I’m also nervous in class.”

Fujimori stuck out her tongue in amazement and collapsed tiredly on the sofa.

It was certainly true that she couldn’t show such a disgraceful attitude in the staff room.

In contrast to the groggy teacher, Touya become somewhat agitated.

“The IE aptitude test score is calculated through a quadratic curve. The difference between 50 and 70 is in fact two-fold.”

“Haah. I see. There’s that much of a difference between me and Touya-kun, huh?”

“45 and 80 are each squared individually… so the difference between us is more than three-fold! Do you get it?”

Puzzled, Homura compared herself and Touya with a glance.

“Well, you know. Touya-kun is a boy, after all.”

“I’m not talking about chest measurement! What are you acting so triumphant about!?”

Touya stood up from the sofa and approached Fujimori.

“In that case, that makes things easier to explain. This girl seems to have completely forgotten, but there’s nothing to criticize about her aptitude as a precious new member of the Seiran High Exploration Club, right?”

“Noooooo—” One of Fujimori’s jean-covered knees and boot heels appeared from the edge of the reception table.

“Waaaaaa—” The table gradually began to rise. The glass sculpture on top slipped off along with the lace mat cover.

“—aaaaay!”

Homura hurriedly backed away as she was pulled back by Touya.

The reception table was kicked up and soundlessly danced through the air, before landing on the carpet after rotating five hundred and forty degrees.

The table splendidly landed face-up in an obedient manner. It would have been a disaster if there were any cups of tea on it.

“…Ah, that shocked me, really shocked me.”

Homura’s eyes shrunk to dots as she held the glass sculpture in her hands.

After confirming that Homura was all right with a glance, Touya agilely lifted up the table.

“Sensei, aren’t you being childish here?”

The sight of him setting the lace cover on the table made him look strangely domestic-oriented.

“In other words, it’s like that? You have a grudge towards her for giving the cold shoulder when you invited her to the Exploration Club in the past?”

“Yeah, got a problem with that?”

The way Fujimori put her chin on her knees as she hugged them on the sofa was just like that of a spoiled brat.

“Rather than a problem, it’s…”

“Most likely, I was with my friends at the time, so my impression of what you said back then was weak…”

"And I tried to dodge the conversation," Homura said as an attempted excuse.

But that pretty much stirred up a hornets' nest.

"The Exploration Club isn't a group of model scouts like you see in Harajuku. As if we'd ever do such a carefree kind of exploration."

"That's the impression it gives off, though."

"Ah, no, that's…" Touya said nervously while scratching his head, as Fujimori glared at him.

"Well, searching for qualified candidates among the enrolled students is mostly done under the guidance of the club president, but it's still supposed to be a state secret. It isn't information that students can pass around."

"State secret!?"

Homura widened her eyes.

Watching Homura's shocked reaction suspiciously with narrowed eyes, Fujimori then slid her accusing gaze towards Touya.

"Did you properly explain everything to Hinooka?"

"Sorry, not yet."

Touya began to explain from square one.

Touya himself hadn't known about Homura's outstanding score, and had merely been told by a certain person that Hinooka Homura had the necessary qualifications to join the Exploration Club.

Even if it was impossible to do a trial membership like Homura wanted, Touya had proposed they go consult with the advisor on whether there was some program that would allow her to gradually grow accustomed to the club activities.

Having not even glanced at a single page of the pamphlet, let alone given it a skim read, Homura had shamefully followed Touya's idea.

After quietly listening to all this with her chin resting on her fists, Fujimori spoke up.

"Okay, listen up. The major reason why I can't accept Hinooka's admission into the club is because I reeeeeally can't stand the thought of it, but—"

"So childish."

"—That aside! There are also other reasons. Two of them, to be precise."

"Those are?"

"First, Touya, your request to join the club went through because the result of your aptitude test, your IE Response, was just barely within permissible limits—"

"IE Response… what's that?"

"You really don't know anything." "Don't you even check news sites?"

Daunted by the scolding from the other two, Homura timidly said, "Please continue."

"The presence or absence of an IE Response is a precondition to joining the club. The issue is Touya's techniques. For surviving."

"Surviving, as in 'survival'[4], right?"

Homura acted a bit proud at her deduction. She was finally becoming more like a member of the Exploration club.

"For instance, our current club president has been receiving Ranger training at Iriomote Island since her first year of middle school."

"R-Ranger training…"

Homura's mental image of the club president levelled up even further. She evolved from a giant to a mountain gorilla.

"…Touya-kun seems to have done kendo, though."

"That's right. His basic stamina is nothing to criticize. His sword techniques can also serve as a fighting asset for the Exploration Club. In fact, I confirmed it after facing him myself. He still lacks knowledge, but he has extraordinary talent when it comes to his physical senses. Our club was lucky to get a hold of him."

Touya nodded without displaying any modesty.

Homura went pale.

"W-W-W-W-Wait just a minute."

Homura stood up, while the other two looked at her oddly.

"How is kendo useful in the Exploration Club's activities?"

"It's a state secret." "Yeah."

"No, no, no. T-Then, does the club president also do some martial arts?"

"Senpai is stronger than me, naturally."

Fujimori also agreed with that assessment.

Homura paled even further.

"In other words, what's your signature finishing move, Hinooka Homura?"

"I never learned any martial arts like that."

Perhaps they were going to send her to Iriomote Island—!?

"The Exploration Club doesn't bring in anyone that can't protect themselves."

"Sensei, what do you think I'm here for? I'll protect Hinooka. An expedition fundamentally consists of two people working together, right?"

"……Haah."

Fujimori scowled with narrowed eyes at Touya who was playing the role of a knight and snorted.

"I told you we don't need mere luggage dragging us down."

"Also, Hinooka!"

Still obstinate, Touya questioned Homura while tapping the table like a keyboard.

"Did you ever play the piano? Or maybe the taishougoto[3]?"

"Piano? Taishougoto?"

Homura was surprised by the sudden change in topic.

"Playing music is also a necessary role, right, sensei?"

Fujimori reluctantly nodded.

"Like the Exploration Club president at Hiyoshizaka High School in the neighbouring district, Koma-senpai—"

"Don't speak of Hiyoshi."

Fujimori cut him off in a displeased tone. Touya shrugged as he continued on.

Homura was left confused by all the variations in accomplishments and martial arts he had mentioned.

Blinking, Touya asked her a question.

"What do you do when you go home after school?"

"When I… go home…"

Glancing away nervously where she stood, Homura confessed the truth.

"I go to sleep…"

A heavy silence descended upon the reception office.

Touya hung his head in a crestfallen manner, and Fujimori could only look away while stretching out her legs.

Homura plopped back down on the sofa.

"……"

There was the sound of the door closing behind Homura.

It appeared the school principal had been peeking into the room.

But no one had noticed.

In order to get out of this unendurable silence, Homura timidly spoke up.

"—Come on, there's the story of the heavy-eating champion sleeping princess dreaming for a thousand years, right?"

Fujimori raised her head with misty eyes.

"Sorry, what?"

"Like, my skill is storing up on sleep and food."

"Do you plan on storing up a lifetime's worth of sleep?"

Suddenly, Touya held up two fingers with his hand to Fujimori.

"What's with that?"

"Sensei, you said there were two reasons."

"Ah, right," Fujimori said while scratching her head and correcting her sitting posture, though she was still sitting cross-legged.

"The second reason is simple."

Fujimori looked into both of their eyes.

"You two are still minors. The agreement of your legal guardians is absolutely necessary to join."

Chapter 1 END

1 Tsutaya is a video rental and book store chain in Japan.
"Behind-the-curtain" refers to the 18+ adult section within the store.

2 From the poem "あどけない話" (Innocent Tale) by Takamura Kotaro, part of a collection of poems about his wife Chieko written in 1941.

3 Secom: A security company based in Japan.

4 Here, Homura translates the Japanese word into the English word "survival" to demonstrate her understanding.

5 Taishougoto: Otherwise known as the Nagoya harp, a Japanese musical instrument with two to five strings.

hmph

Chapter 2

After returning home, Homura lay down face-up on her bed.

She raised her palm and partially blotted out the sunlight with her fingers, making shadow images on the wall.

"……"

Now that she thought about it, she had merely been subjected to criticisms over her club entry by the club that had forcibly invited her to join. She hadn't actually lost anything.

She just felt a little shocked by how she was systemically told the same disparaging words of scorn that her sister always used from someone else.

Once again, her lazy and disinterested personality, making her incapable of continuing anything for long, had been scorned.

"It doesn't matter…"

Homura mumbled that as she tossed and turned on her bed.

It wasn't like she couldn't live without any ambition, and it wasn't like she would definitely be rewarded if she worked hard either.

She didn't look down on others.

She had never wanted to win at something or defeat someone.

But, just as she had been about to leave, the Exploration Club advisor had told her one final thing.

"If you want to have your club entry approved, go and win first place in the Shinryoku[1] Festival here. It can be in any category. Just make sure you get first place. Prove that you won't lose to anyone of this school in a certain field."

As a festival lover herself, Homura had been looking forward to the Shinryoku Festival at school.

Sponsored by the student council, it was a slightly odd event that was meant to greet the new students, occurring after the completion of the mid-term exams.

If she remembered right, she should have had a print-out containing details on the event.

After thinking of that, Homura reached for her bag from the bed… but her arm couldn't reach, so she stretched out her toes and picked up her bag with them.

She turned over the bag, and out from it fell the Exploration Club's advertising pamphlet that she'd left in there since yesterday.

On the pamphlet that was slightly more slender than a textbook, the words "Exploration Club Guide" were written with a background depicting a wild and natural landscape on top of a smooth and sleek cover.

The title was inscribed in gold leaf, as if it were surrounded by holographic rings.

When she turned it over, she found various corporate names listed on the backside.

"Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications… Ministry of Foreign Affairs… UNPIEP…? What's that supposed to stand for…? United Nations Pioneering Imaginary Earth Program…? What's that?"

It was a list of stiff and formal words without a single character of hiragana[2]. That alone made her tired of reading it.

For Homura, to whom 'books' meant fashion magazines, this book was too much for her brain.

Having lost any interest in turning the pages of the pamphlet, Homura idly traced the holographic letters on the cover, and she recalled Touya's words from earlier.

It was all Touya's fault that her mood was messed up.

The pattern was always the same with boys who approached her.

They either wanted Homura or held some childish competitiveness that made them want to prove their superiority over her. She wasn't used to being easily ignored as she was now at her current school.

In that environment, Touya was, to her, the first Unidentified Boy Object (UBO) for her to have a close encounter with.

Miss Fujimori was also plenty strange herself, but Homura could understand her rude words. When she talked with her more closely outside of the classroom, Homura immediately understood that she was plenty feminine. The reason she repressed it was surely out of antagonism towards men.

"Sorry."

Touya had muttered that while pushing his bicycle.

'You're giving up with just this? You don't want me?' Unable to say such misdirected words, Homura had parted with him while the atmosphere remained awkward between them.

Just as the sun was about to set and her room was darkening, a knock came from her door.

A cheeky voice came from the other side of the door.

"Homura? Are you planning to sleep for three years? Dad has come home."

Homura's father, Hinooka Masafumi, followed the creed of returning home early and eating together with the entire family at least twice a week. This was just about the only thing that Homura was able to continue doing without giving up after a while. Even when she had a boyfriend, she admirably followed this family tradition without ever skipping. Well, with her younger sister Tsuyu getting busier studying for her entrance exams, that too would only last until next year when Tsuyu would advance to high school.

Without looking through the pamphlet in the end, Homura went downstairs and sat at the dining table.

Tonight's dinner was cheese fondue. The smell of wine permeated the air.

Her younger sister skillfully cut a baguette into cubes with a long bread-cutting knife.

"Here's the ladle."

Tsuyu handed a fondue-use wooden spatula to her mother.

Homura liked how the fondue with its alcohol burner lit on the table had a bit of a camp-like, rustic beauty to it. According to her mother Serina, it was a meal that gave off the atmosphere of sitting together in a happy circle, while requiring overwhelmingly easy preparations to make in comparison.

As such, even outside of the winter season, the Hinooka family would often eat this fondue meal.

"Homura, the pot."

"Oops."

Poked by her younger sister, Homura tore her gaze away from absently watching the TV and frantically stirred the pot. If the contents of the pot burned and became sticky, the fondue would become the worst picture of Hell.

Her younger sister grumbled in her usual tone.

"It would be nice if we could buy a fondue-use electromagnetic cooker or a hotplate…"

"Eh, but that's a good pot. Isn't it cute?" Homura protested while arranging the mini-salad bowl.

"I also like it. You don't see this kind of design anymore. Right?" her mother said, smiling gently at Homura's words.

Homura's mother was young and kind.

These days, there were times when she and Homura were mistaken for sisters while they were shopping.

Homura resembled her mother, and her younger sister clearly resembled their father. In particular, her sister and father were both short-sighted.

"Then make sure not to burn it, Homura." Tsuyu grumbled. "It's always a trouble to wash it afterwards."

"I'll wash it myself."

"Liar."

"Tsuyu, you shouldn't address your sister so impolitely."

Their father, having just gotten out of the bath, sat down at the table.

Tsuyu glared at her father with a frown.

"…Dad."

"Hmm? What's wrong?"

"Masafumi-san, please make sure to leave water in the bath for the girls later."

"Ah. I forgot," their father said as he gaped.

The way he couldn't oppose his wife's words at all was their father's cute point.

"I don't mind at all," Homura said.

"I can't believe you," Tsuyu grumbled as she struck her bread-cutting knife against the cutting board with a bang.

"Sorry, Tsuyu. You too, Homura. I'll pay more attention next time."

The family had gathered around the table.

They made silly and trifling conversation.

They talked about how the family car was being examined and how they would have to use a loaned car for a while, and Tsuyu complained about how she wanted to go to a different cram school.

Suddenly, during a news flash on the TV, Homura saw familiar letters dance across the screen.

"UNPIEP… is it pronounced 'anpiepu'?" Homura murmured.

"It's an acronym, so it doesn't really matter how you pronounce it. More importantly, do you even know its official name?"

Homura wanted to smash the piping hot fondue against Tsuyu's irritating face.

"O-Of course I know it. It's called the United… League of… Gi… Giant Stuffed Animals… or something."

"Wrong. Was that on purpose? It's the United Nations Pioneering Imaginary Earth Program[4]!"

"Hmm. So, what is it?"

Both her sister and father drooped their shoulders despondently.

"It appears in Social Studies tests these days, you know?"

Tsuyu strongly nodded at her father's words.

"Sorry. Don't know it. It's probably something from Tsuyu's grade."

"There's no way that could be," Tsuyu retorted. "It's common knowledge. It's fundamental knowledge these days."

"UN… I don't know anything about that kind of thing either," their mother admitted.

"Ah, that's right. They call it by the popular name 'Imaginary Earth Nutella' on the news. They might start making insurance related to the Imaginary Earth at my company too."

"Oh my, is that so? But didn't they say that they still don't know much about it?"

"That's exactly why. In the first place, insurance companies originated from dispatching collateral to aristocrats when trading vessels sunk during the Great Age of Exploration."

"You mean Lloyd's insurance market in England, right?"

"Yeah, right. You're quite knowledgeable, Tsuyu," their father complimented.

Homura's chest slightly prickled.

Imaginary Earth Nutella… Speaking of which, she felt like she'd heard of it before… or not.

"That Imaginary Earth thing, it might be connected to the Exploration Club."

Her glasses-wearing father and sister were once again left dumbfounded.

"Geez, could you two stop with that face?" Homura protested as she jabbed her metal chopsticks into a piece of bread.

"You're interested in the Exploration Club, Homura-chan?" her mother asked.

"Err, rather than interested…"

"Homura—Onee-chan, you aren't in any clubs, so how about you join the Exploration Club?"

"Muu, then why don't you try joining it, Tsuyu? If you're already bored of tossing batons."

Her younger sister had zealously worked hard practicing in her Cheerleading Club, but recently, there had been no sign of her practicing at all.

"Tsuyu is preparing for her entrance exams. It can't be helped."

"That's right, I'm different from you, Onee-chan."

"Though Homura-chan is cute," her mother added disappointingly with a sigh.

"Uu… Anyway, this isn't a joke! Joining the Exploration Club is like becoming a sacrifice for the country. There are rumors that, even though there are a lot of club members that have actually gone missing, it never appears on the news due to government censuring."

"…Eh?"

Homura was shocked by her sister's words.

Her father also silently nodded while stuffing his cheeks with bread.

Only her mother looked puzzled.

"Really? When I was a university student, there were people in the university Exploration Club that crossed the Pacific Ocean on self-made rafts, but they all came back safely."

"Kuh… Mom, that was a normal Exploration Club, a university group, right? The Imaginary Earth is a really dangerous place where common sense doesn't apply at all."

"Hey, are there other… rumors like that…?"

Though she really didn't want to hear it, Homura hesitantly asked.

"Others? Yeah, there are. Like how members are given a cell phone equipped with a transmitter and put on surveillance 24-7, or how toxins build up in their body just by spending a long time there—"

"……"

They were all dangerous-sounding rumors. They might just be pieces of idle gossip, but Homura couldn't laugh when she recalled the words 'state secret' that Touya and Fujimori had said.

While tracing the round slices of paprika that formed the color scheme of the salad bowl using her chopsticks, Homura confessed what was on her mind.

"The truth is… I'm thinking about joining the Exploration Club…"

She didn't mention that she had been rejected in the very first interview. There was no point in telling them that part.

"Oh my, isn't that nice?"

Her mother clapped her hands together happily.

"Do whatever you want."

Her younger sister spoke while crunching on a cherry tomato stem in her mouth.

And when Homura looked to her father, he was in the midst of returning with some beer from the refrigerator.

"Hey, what do you think about it, Dad?"

The sound of the beer can popping open followed Homura's question.

"Hmm? A club, huh? Why not? I always approve of you starting something. Of course, your studies take priority, but in your case, Homura, I think it'd be better if you got a bit more exercise."

"I still don't know whether I'll manage to join or not, though."

Homura smiled self-effacingly.

"You'll surely be fine if it's you, Homura-chan."

"If it's things like tools that are on your mind, you don't need to worry. It's different from clothes or manga, after all."

"Apparently, the state prepares all that stuff, though…"

That was quite obvious, based on that fortress erected on the school grounds.

"The state?"

Tsuyu's fingers froze in motion.

After quite vigorously shaking his beer can, her father asked once again.

"So, what club are you joining?"

"The Exploration Club."

"That sounds like a great idea," her mother said approvingly.

"By Exploration Club, you mean THAT Exploration Club?"

Wrinkles foretelling a frown quickly spread across her father's brow.

"It sounds romantic, and working together with your comrades seems fun."

"The UNPIEP Exploration Club? For Youth Investigators of the Imaginary Earth?"

While trying to suppress his shaking hand, her father accidentally put down his beer can over the edge of the table, but Tsuyu flawlessly caught it.

"No way! I absolutely forbid it!"

This was the second time today that Homura had been subjected to criticism.

The pot shook on its stand. The burner's fire blinked out for an instant and a peculiar smell wafted over the dining table.

Though the force of her father's anger was as she expected, she still responded hesitantly.

"I-I still haven't decided for sure yet, though."

"Either way, I forbid it! It's too dangerous. That club's just a smokescreen by the government to cover up their lack of actual measures and policies on the matter. It's the same as the moon development plans! It's all high risk and no return!"

"B-But, didn't you say it's reached the point where it will become a commodity for your insurance company, Dad?"

"This and that are two different things!"

Her younger sister also backed up her father's argument in this case.

"Are you stupid, Homura? You need the right qualifications to join the Exploration Club, you know?"

Indignant, Homura lifted her chin in a prickly manner and tried to bluff.

"I didn't mention it before, but I do have the qualifications to join the Exploration Club. I took the aptitude test when I was in middle school, and my results were satisfactory. So…"

"I never heard anything about that. And regardless of whether or not you have the qualifications, young lady—"

"Masafumi-san, yelling too much isn't good for your body."

"Yes."

Rebuked by his wife, Homura's father sat back in his seat, but his anger was clearly smoldering.

Her mother spoke to him while maintaining her gentle smile.

"Homura-chan declared it herself, so let's just stand back and watch over her."

"……"

As Homura was left speechless, her father somehow maintained his calm as he resumed speaking.

"Sorry, Homura. I shouldn't have yelled. But I really am opposed to it."

He turned back towards his wife.

"Serina-san, are there any parents who want to send their children to war?"

"War?"

His wife was puzzled.

"Yes. The name 'Exploration Club' sounds nice, but it is part of a proxy war with the honor of each country staked on it."

Homura's father continued with a serious face.

"In socialist countries, after the fall of the Berlin Wall, many young people were treated as disposable pawns with the use of drugs in order to train Olympic gold medalists. Even now, there are former competitors who suffer impairments from those times and live harsh lives without ever

receiving any proper compensation. That competition itself was the battleground of the Cold War. The Exploration Club is a den of secretiveness and systemization that allows anything as long as it brings about showy results."

"Hmm… I do truly feel bad for those competitors who were sacrificed in the Cold War, but Homura-chan would never get involved in something so terrible."

"She doesn't understand anything. They'll brainwash her in the organization. That's the most terrifying thing about it."

"There's always something like that to a greater or lesser degree, right? First, she has to try it out. Right?"

"Y-Yeah…"

Her mother's soft fingers touched Homura's fingertips.

Just by bringing up the topic a little to discuss with the rest of the family, Homura had actually ended up creating an atmosphere that stopped her from hastily saying that she had refused to join the club.

"And the things Tsuyu-chan spoke about earlier are still just rumors, right? Homura-chan still hasn't experienced anything dangerous. Don't you think that Homura-chan should join and make her own judgment on it after seeing it with her own eyes?"

"I wonder about that," Tsuyu murmured.

"It will be too late at that point. In the first place, it's impossible. The employment age limit for the Exploration club is…"

At that point, her father's shoulders drooped and he heaved a big sigh before saying, "Let's stop arguing over this."

"Yeah… let's continue talking about it another time."

Her mother still didn't seem to have accepted her husband's explanation.

Her father also merely nodded obediently for the time being.

"The fondue is burning."

With a fed-up expression, Tsuyu poked at the lake of cheese in the pot with her ladle, making a crunchy sound at the depths of the pot as a savory smell wafted out. The crispy cheese was turned inside out and splintered across its surface from the edge inwards.

"Ah, I like that. It's like a cheese rice cracker," her mother said happily.

"I'll also have some," her father said as well.

"It's not fondue anymore, you know."

The next day. Recess between classes.

As preparations for the Shinryoku Festival advanced within the school, the posters hung on the corridor walls were changed.

Club recruiting posters were switched with all kinds of program sheets for the festival.

Homura absentmindedly gazed at the newly hung posters.

Seiran High's Shinryoku Festival was an event held by gathering various plans and projects from all the sports and culture clubs.

The difference with the Cultural Festival was that the second and third year students planned and executed the event, while the first years served as the festival's participants. Also, each club proposed

a project and the student council selected ten of them to be implemented in the festival. As such, there were many cases where several clubs submitted a plan together.

In other words, it was a school-wide welcoming party for first year students.

Homura looked over the posters lined up on the wall.

There were things like [Basket-Volleyball-Handball Summit Play-Off], [Kanji Larger Than One Meter! Giant Calligraphy Exhibition], and [Karaoke Tournament Accompanied by a Brass Band at Full Power!].

There seemed to be a lot of projects for participants like tournaments or concerts.

As she looked further down the line, Homura saw that the remaining posters were still in the midst of being hung up.

"Doesn't it still lack some impact like this?"

"Should we decorate with gold lace or something?"

"I think there's some luminous paint left over."

"Please don't. In the first place, what good does it do us to make it stand out at night?"

A tall female student was giving various directions to a boy hanging up the posters.

The female student was a third year with an attitude just like that of a supervisor.

Homura recalled seeing her face often at the school's morning assembly as well. If she remembered right, she was…

"Here."

Suddenly, that female upperclassman turned around and handed Homura a rolled-up poster without batting an eyelash.

"You're Hinooka Homura-san from Class 1-A, right?"

"Yes. Ah, umm, how did you know my name—?"

"That's my natural responsibility as the student council president, after all."

The student council president puffed up with pride as she stood at attention.

"Ah, just so you know, she's lying. She just happened to remember it."

The male second year student nearby whispered that to her, resulting in the student council president clapping him over the head with a rolled-up poster.

"You're President Rokujizou, right?"

"YES! Seiran High's student council president, Rokujizou Takara. Nice to meet you!"

"Y-Yes. Nice to meet you too."

Homura received quite a powerful handshake.

There were a lot of spirited women like this at this school. Maybe something about the place attracted them here?

"How about it, Hinooka-san? I personally recommend this event here!"

The student council president pointed at the poster she had given Homura.

Doing as told, Homura smoothly rolled open the poster, and on it appeared an event title along with the illustration of a slovenly-dressed woman who looked like a geisha or a dancing girl.

"[Tea Ceremony Club and Swimming Club Joint Project, Yamato Nadeshiko[4] Contest]…"

In other words, this was *that* kind of thing.

"Doing a beauty pageant in this day and age is practically sexual harassment…"

The second year boy grumbled, receiving another strike to the head in the process.

If Homura remembered right, this male upperclassman who gave off the feeling of being dominated was the student council's accountant.

"Hey now, there's no other event that's as popular as this. We don't do it every year as an annual custom just for show, after all."

"I'm amazed you got the school to give permission for it," Homura said, impressed, even as she wore a strained smile.

"It's because it's listed as a swim meet on paper."

The student council president replied nonchalantly.

"Huh… eh?"

Homura reflexively looked at the poster again.

When she carefully looked over the main points of the event, there were strange rules included like competing over points divided between being judged artistically for tea making and being judged for your technique in a fifty meter free-style swim.

"Our school's prided indoor pool plays a big part in the event."

"The highlight is the girls taking off their kimono and changing into swimsuits at the pool."

"Uwaa…"

That was pushing the limit even for showmanship.

"But, though it seems like a popular event, it's a high hurdle for first year students, so I don't think many girls will willingly participate…" Homura pointed out.

"Fufufu, the winner gets a gift certificate for books. And the extra prize… is the right to double the budget of the club the winner is part of!"

"Ah, I see…"

In other words, all the clubs were sending out their best members to participate.

The student council was truly terrifying.

"Similarly, I was the winner the year before last in my first year."

Rokujizou smugly pointed at herself with both her thumbs.

"Wow, that's amazing."

Homura was honestly impressed.

"That's right, praise me, praise me more."

"…It was really terrible. The student council basically took the top rank in all categories, after all. That's why they substantially lowered the scoring ratio for technique since last year."

"Don't. Say. Anything. Unnecessary!"

The accountant was struck so hard that the poster harshly bent after hitting him.

The fact that he properly continued working even while being hit demonstrated how used to this he actually was.

The student council president turned to look at Homura with sparkling eyes.

"So, how about it? You look like you'd really look good in a kimono, Hinooka-san, and I think you could have good prospects for winning."

"Umm, thanks for the offer, but… I don't know anything about tea making, and swimming isn't my forte… Moreover, I haven't read many books either."

"It's fine. That kind of thing is just playing around, after all. In the end, what's important is the person's interior substance. What's inside will show up on the outside. Someone with a pretty and pure appearance will have their heart grow and mature in an upright manner as well. Besides that, you just need to take off your kimono as erotically as possible when you change out of it, right?"

Even if Rokujizou said "Right?", Homura was troubled over how to respond to that.

"And if there are no major contenders, senpai's football pool event will also fall through… is what she's leaving unsaid."

"Yamashina, you should shut up soon if you know what's good for you."

"Keep that a secret," the president said while putting a finger to her lips and winking at Homura.

It appeared that they were raising money by sending in assassins backed by the student council this year as well.

The student council truly was terrifying.

The student council president suddenly stopped moving after she hung up another poster.

"That reminds me, what club are you in, Hinooka-san?"

"I'm… No, I'm in the Going-Home Club[4]."

"Seriously?"

"Yes."

"Then, why not join the student council. Will you join? You'll join, right!? Come on, join us!!"

"Hey, President? The student council members for this year have already been decided, you know?" Yamashina interjected.

True, the election of student council members had ended calmly just a few days again with a lack of rival candidates.

"The post of accountant became vacant just now."

"Hey."

The student council president held out her open palms apologetically while laughing.

The president took the poster back from Homura and moved to pin it to the wall herself.

Homura also helped by holding down the ends for her.

Having guessed from the atmosphere that her invitation had been declined, the president nodded regretfully.

"I see, how unfortunate… Well, leaving that aside, feel free to come and play at the student council whenever you like. I think it would be good for you to get used to the atmosphere of the student council in preparation for when the accountant dies in an unforeseen accident."

"T-Thanks. I appreciate the offer."

The accountant in question, Yamashina-senpai, was in the middle of running errands to the preparations room to get more decorations.

While pushing down and straightening out the last poster that had been bent after harshly hitting Yamashina earlier, Homura asked the president a question.

"Umm, President? Can I ask you something?"

"What is it?"

"Will the Exploration Club be hosting an event in the Shinryoku Festival?"

"Ah, the Exploration Club, huh?"

The president murmured while pondering where to place the pushpin on the poster.

After giving up on hanging it up properly, she arranged it in a way that made it look like some crumpled piece of art instead. It was quite a bother to the club that had made the posters.

"Unfortunately, they didn't hand in a proposal this year. Though I was hoping they would."

"Like I thought, it's difficult when they only have two members, right?"

"Hmm? They have three members, you know?"

"Eh? Doesn't the Exploration Club only have two—"

"……"

As silence descended between them for a while, Rokujizou turned to face Homura.

There seemed to be some stiffness in her expression.

"Who did you hear that from?"

"Umm… Touya-kun, from the Exploration Club."

"That little brat…"

Rokujizou glared at the pin in her hand with hateful eyes.

Then, she quickly relaxed her expression and looked back at Homura.

"Hinooka-san, could it be that you—"

Rokujizou suddenly cut off her words in the midst of talking.

Her gaze was directed at something behind Homura.

When Homura reflexively turned around, she saw a slender silhouette wearing jeans standing there at the end of the hallway.

For a while, Rokujizou and that person gazed at each other sharply as if competing with each other.

But in the end, the other person left soon after, and the student council president also merely shrugged and spoke to Homura.

"Hmm, never mind. Forget about it. It was a misunderstanding on my part."

"Hah."

Homura didn't press her further.

The president then expressed her gratitude for the help with the posters as she departed.

"Thanks, Hinooka-san. If there are any events you're interested in, please make sure to participate, okay? The whole point of a festival is to get pulled along by the flow of events! Get into the thick of things!"

"I-I'll consider it."

"Please consider it positively!"

On her way home from school that day.

As she was riding the commute train.

Homura's fingers froze as she was about to send a text to a friend attending another school.

She suddenly felt sick of the message, reading 'I really wasn't able to make a good leading joke', which could only be taken as an idle complaint, or rather simple discontent grumbling towards the other person.

In the end, she deleted the text and leaned against the handrail to gaze out the train window. Scenery that she had gotten tired of looking at passed by outside.

Just as it was about to turn to evening.

She arrived at the station, and just as she was leaving the ticket gate, she once again saw that woman in the summer sweater.

Homura went to buy a coffee milk carton at the vending machine next to the station kiosk, and as she inserted the straw into it, she gazed at the woman for a while.

As always, she was calling out humbly and trying to hand out flyers, but only one person out of thirty at most took one.

Homura had started seeing her at this station around three years ago.

She had noticed the woman while commuting to school by train, but the woman always appeared there once or twice a week (the second time when it was a holiday), with the exact day of the week she appeared differing slightly as time went on.

A summer sweater with pieces of lint standing out on it. Short hair. When Homura had first seen her, she had much longer and beautiful hair.

It used to be tied up behind her head, until it eventually became short as it was now. Homura recalled how she had thought it was a waste when she saw the change.

"…She wears very little makeup."

While sipping on the coffee milk with her back against the station wall, Homura absentmindedly gazed at the woman.

The woman wore a minimal amount of makeup, and she never seemed to wear it well either.

She should still be quite young, probably in her late twenties, but her fingers and eyes clearly indicated inerasable exhaustion.

"How long will she continue like that…?"

Homura had thought, 'Ah, how sad', when she first saw the woman.

She also feared what she should do if that happened to someone close to her.

But at some point, she had become completely tired of looking at the woman, and now she was buried in the background scenery of the station without evoking any emotion in Homura. Sometimes, there was a slight change and the woman caught her attention, making part of her feeling depressed at the sight.

On the station bulletin board, there was the same flyer that the woman was handing out. The only difference was that the tape attaching it to the board had aged to the point of fading in color.

A flyer was blown near Homura's feet by the wind. Someone had probably dropped it there after receiving it.

Homura squatted down and picked it up.

I'm searching for this child.

If you held a piece of hope that you couldn't throw away, how were you supposed to give up on it?

The picture of a very young baby girl stared back at Homura blankly.

The flyer stated that she went missing when she was one year and one month old.

"Then she would already be four years old by now…"

The clothes she wore when she went missing—such information was completely useless at this point.

The last place where she was seen was the restaurant floor within a department store right near this station.

Even if it said that, that department store had already been closed and the entire block of restaurants there was gone, replaced with supermarkets and diners that were open all hours of the day.

"By now, she would have gone to kindergarten and went on her first traditional shrine visit…"

She would have been pampered by her grandpa and grandma in the countryside and eaten a birthday cake.

What was the person closest to both this baby and this woman doing right now? Why wasn't he here? He should definitely exist, this baby's father—

All the circumstances surrounding it had absoluuuuuutely noooothing to do with Homura anyway.

Even today, there were plenty of people in the world who were unfortunate, who lost their lives in unreasonable accidents and circumstances and lost their irreplaceable family. There were plenty of others who were suffering the consequences of their own actions as well.

There were people more unfortunate than this woman who had lost her child. If you were to compare people's happiness, that is.

It was often said, 'What are you going to do even if you care?'

Don't pop songs also say it?

How can you make other people happy if you don't become happy yourself?

Even manga shouted it.

Things will change. Memories won't disappear. So forget about it.

"It's impossible. Someone—"

Someone? Who?

That woman was always standing in the middle of the crowd of people passing by and lowering her head like a mechanical doll.

Please. Please. Please.

"Umm."

Before she knew it, Homura was standing in front of the woman, while holding the flyer she had picked up in one hand and her coffee milk carton in the other.

"…?"

Though she was confused for an instant, the woman soon gave a gentle smile.

"Hello again. On your way home, are you?"

The woman looked radiantly at Homura's uniform.

This might be the first time Homura had seen her smile. And no matter how sad and lonely it looked, Homura couldn't help but feel it was worth calling out to her because of it.

"So you're a high school student now."

"Ah, yes. Umm, I…"

Homura quickly ran over to the station wall to put down her bag there and then came back.

"Umm, may I help?"

Homura held out her hands towards the bundle of flyers.

"Thank you. But it's all right."

'It's all right.' Those words resounded heavily in Homura's chest.

Take, for example, a heavyweight blow.

Her irresponsible sympathy on a whim had caused her to be lightly blown away outside of the ring.

Homura froze as her offered hands lost an outlet.

The commuters passing by glanced at Homura and then immediately blended back into the station rotary in the evening.

"No, umm, I—"

She didn't mind being stared at. Just, the woman's exhausted gaze—

And yet, despite the exhaustion, those eyes of a mother who hadn't lost a firm will at her deepest depths made Homura feel tense and strained.

Words of justice repeated in manga and TV dramas went through her brain. But…

"E-Even if I got home now, I'd be bored with nothing to do."

—What came out of her mouth were those horrible words.

"…I-Is it no good?"

"……"

There was a brief instant of silence.

And then, the woman let a chuckle.

"Then can I rely on you for a little while?"

"Yes. Thank you. I really appreciate it."

Homura accepted half of the bundle of flyers. It had the faint smell of an ink jet printer.

She copied the woman's manner of doing things, having long gotten used to seeing her at work, and held out flyers while calling out to students her age.

Nothing particularly changed. Even the people who took it after seeing the odd sight of Homura there as well immediately saw it was a familiar flyer and lost interest as they carelessly shoved it into their pockets.

In the end, the peak of the home commute rush ended without them being able to hand out many flyers, just as expected.

After taking a rest, the woman gave a deep bow to Homura.

"If possible, can I ask your name?"

"Yes, I'm—"

Homura gave out her name, and the woman handed out her business card in return.

It held a contact address that was no different from what was printed on the flyer, but Homura treated it preciously as she put it in her commuter pass case. It was the first business card she had ever received in her life.

Chapter 2 END

1 Shinryoku: Japanese for “fresh green leaves/verdure”.
2 To better explain, hiragana is the simpler written system of the Japanese language that uses purely phonetic characters. Since the words in question use the more difficult and varied concept-based kanji characters, Homura has trouble reading them and likely does not fully understand the proper meaning and pronunciation.
3 Here, Tsuyu repeats the word twice, once in the original Japanese and a second time in English to explain the letters behind the acronym. Since this is redundant in English, I only had her say it once here.
4 Yamato Nadeshiko: a woman who displays the feminine virtues of old Japan.
5 Going-Home Club: the Japanese term for those who aren’t in any clubs and simply go home after school.
6 This refers to a traditional rite of passage and festival day in Japan for three-year-old and seven-year-old girls and three-year old and five-year-old boys, held annually on November 15.

Chapter 3

"You're late, light-weight warrior!"

"Ah?"

When Touya raised his head, he met the gaze of Homura, who was looking down towards him from above.

On the stairs' landing above him, Homura was peering down at him while leaning both her arms against the handrail.

"Are you giving up after only that?"

"…Huh? You mean the invitation to join the club?"

It was the first time in four days, including the weekend, that Homura was meeting Touya.

"That's right. Are you going to give up that easily? Don't you want me? My aptitude score was [80-B]. Don't you want this super-promising investigator candidate?"

"I can see your panties, you know."

"W-What color are they, then?"

"Are you an idiot?"

Touya calmly climbed the stairs at his own pace, one step at a time.

Blushing, Homura quickly ran down the stairs to meet him at eye level.

Touya spoke to Homura with a serious expression.

"I haven't given up."

He scratched his head.

"But anybody would be shocked after being told all that. I just thought… you needed some time to sort out your feelings."

Being shown such consideration by this bumpkin boy was a huge shock for Homura.

The anger that had been seething in Homura's chest without any outlet as she agonized by herself the past few days had calmed down a little now.

"T-Thanks for that. But I've decided."

"Decided what…?"

Grinning, Homura poked Touya's chest with a clenched fist.

"But aren't you getting ahead of yourself, Hinooka? Don't you remember what one of Mori-chan's [conditions] was?"

"Yeah. Come with me for a bit."

Homura pulled Touya's sleeve as she ran off once again.

The two of them headed to the corridor with the long bulletin board, on which the student council president and her accountant had hung up posters.

The Shinryoku Festival included ten big events that were listed side by side on the board, with new students standing in front of it.

Quite a crowd had gathered in front of the board.

First year students were encamped in front of the posters that interested them and were carefully scrutinizing the contents of the events.

When Homura suddenly appeared among them, she drew people's attention unintentionally.

"Everyone seems to be looking forward to the festival."

"……"

Touya once again stared at Homura with a gaze filled with nothing but questions.

"Now then, which event do you think I'm going to participate in, Touya-kun?"

"Aren't you acting completely differently from before? Ah, let me think."

While looking over the posters, Touya reflected on his conversation with her a few days ago.

One of the conditions that Miss Fujimori had given.

It can be in any category. Win and prove that you're the best at something in this school.

Strictly speaking, second and third-year students wouldn't be participating, so, it basically meant getting first place among the first years. Perhaps Fujimori meant it as a sort of helping hand for Homura.

However, he understood that telling Homura this wouldn't give her any peace of mind.

Touya pointed at the poster in front of him.

"…How about this one? The [Gardening Club and Handicrafts Club Joint Event: Flower Arrangement That Seems Edible Yet Isn't But You Can Still Eat A Little]."

"Close, but no cigar. Incorrect. Wrong Answer."

Homura shook her head with a prim expression.

"Why did you think it was that one?"

"Because it had a flower pattern."

"Flower—Wait, you…"

"Come on, give me a hint or something."

Homura blushed again and backed away while pressing down on her skirt.

Touya quickly threw up his hands with an amazed expression.

"I give up, okay? Just tell me."

Homura slid sideways through the backs of the other students, passing by the poster of the questionably legal beauty contest, the [Yamato Nadeshiko Contest]… and stopped in front of a certain event poster.

"This one."

"This psychedelic poster?"

Homura had slapped her palm against the poster for the [Home Economics Club Event: Boxed Lunch Contest].

The wrinkled poster had a huge lunch box drawn across its entire surface and had various decorations made out of origami posted on it.

"I see."

Touya crossed his arms as he gazed at the poster.

"Hey, Hinooka-san?"

One of the girls in Homura's class who happened to be there spoke up.

"Hinooka-san, you're not going to participate in the [Yamato Nadeshiko Contest]?"

"Y-Yeah. I want to participate in the [Boxed Lunch Contest]."

Her classmate made a disappointed face upon hearing that.

"Eeh, what a waste. I heard this from one of the upperclassmen, but apparently, this is an annual customary event meant to choose successors for the student council."

"Why?"

Touya cut into the conversation.

"Ah, you're Touya-kun, from Class C, right?"

It seemed Touya was quite well-known among the female students as well.

"Our school has tended to have an overwhelming number of female student council presidents for generations, so this event became famous and ended up effectively deciding who's going to be the next president."

"Hmm? But didn't the student council elections already end?"

"No one's going to suddenly become student council president in their first year," Homura pointed out. "Students formally announce their candidacy in their second year, right?"

"A female-dominant community, huh?"

Touya nodded in understanding.

"Well, whatever. More importantly, the issue right now is you."

"Y-Yeah."

"Since you decided it yourself, Hinooka-san, it's not my place to meddle."

"Thank you for your consideration."

"But I really don't understand. The [Yamato Nadeshiko Contest] is basically a beauty contest, right? Why not that one?"

"You're completely meddling right now, aren't you?"

Her female classmate also pressed Homura on the matter.

"That's right. Hinooka-san would definitely be able to win. Rather, I'd like to see Hinooka-san in a kimono~"

"She definitely would get full scores in a swimsuit at least."

"Hey, you two."

As Homura faltered, a crowd of even more male and female students joined in from behind her.

They questioned Homura with immense curiosity.

"Hinooka-san is participating in the [Yamato Nadeshiko Contest]?" "I'll also be cheering for you, okay?"

"I'm from the Swimming Club. I'd love it if you participated, Hinooka-san."

"I'm from the Tea Ceremony Club. If you want, I can give you a crash course in it." "Hey, that's rigging the game."

"N-No, umm? I'm thinking of participating in the [Boxed Lunch Contest]—"

Pressured by the festival-loving spirit of the other students, Homura turned around to search for Touya, but he was conversing with the girl from earlier while wearing an expression of admiration.

"Hinooka is really popular, isn't she?"

"You're only noticing this now, Touya-kun?" the female student asked.

Gugugu, damn him, is he just another perverted boy in the end? Hinooka cursed in her heart.

Unintentionally going with the flow of the excited atmosphere around her was one of Homura's weaknesses.

But this time, she couldn't afford to give in.

Timely help came from an unexpected place.

"Hmm. The Boxed Lunch Contest, huh?"

The person who peeked at the poster from behind Homura over her shoulder was the teacher Fujimori.

"Ah, Mori-chan."

"Fujimori… sensei."

Fujimori spoke to Homura unconcernedly.

"Isn't that fine? Go ahead and give it a try."

"You'll cheer for me?"

"I can't, so isn't that fine?"

"…Yes."

Taken aback, Homura nodded firmly.

"What a terrible teacher."

"Don't get caught up in sex appeal, young first year boys. Appetite is more important than sex appeal in life."

Fujimori lightly warded off Touya's words of reproach and then left to go to the staff room.

In the end, Homura stated that she wouldn't be participating in the [Yamato Nadeshiko Contest], and as a result the crowd dispersed and the corridor became sparsely crowded once again.

As Homura sighed in relief, Touya spoke up.

"Well anyway, even though I said that stuff earlier, if you really have your heart set on this, then I wish you luck, Hinooka. I'll do what I can to support you in my own way."

"Yeah, thank you… By the way, what exactly will you do, concretely?"

"Let's talk about the details later."

True, recess was about to end.

She had to take her class materials for the afternoon elective class back to the classroom.

Parting with Touya, Homura was about to leave the corridor with the bulletin in the company of the female classmate from earlier who was still loitering there when she suddenly noticed a certain female student.

She was standing alone, holding her class materials against her chest while looking slightly forlornly at the posters.

Homura spoke up to her with a smile.

"Kujou-san?"

It was Kujou Orie from her class.

This was the first time Homura had spoken to her since Kujou had given her the cold shoulder when Homura had tried to walk home together with her.

"Are you going to participate in one of the events, Kujou-san?"

"……No."

Kujou shook her head slightly.

"It's voluntary participation, after all."

"Yeah, that's true, but it's basically a festival. There are events that have nothing to do with winning or losing."

"You're going to be participating, aren't you?"

"I was thinking of joining this [Boxed Lunch Contest]."

Kujou looked at Homura expressionlessly.

"I see."

After murmuring that, Kujou suddenly turned on her heels and walked off to the special classroom.

The bell for afternoon lessons began to ring.

While walking together at a hurried pace, Homura's female classmate whispered beside her.

"Kujou-san… gives off a scary vibe."

"Eh? That's not true, you know? I was in the same middle school as her."

"I know that, but she always goes home right after school ends and is hard to talk to."

"Hmm…"

Homura didn't say anything about Kujou being in the Going-Home Club.

Homura once again thought to herself that she didn't know anything about Kujou.

Chapter 3 END

nununu....

Chapter 4

Early in the morning at the Hinooka household.

After seeing off her father as he drove off to work early, Tsuyu rolled open the morning newspaper in the yard of their house.

The cool morning air crept in through the sleeves of her pajamas.

Glimpses of clear sky broke through the cloud cover above, indicating that today's weather would be nice.

"So Kobo-chan is finally in high school too…"

The sound of squeaking brakes resounded through the air. It seemed to have come from the front porch.

It sounded different from the brakes of the mailman's bicycle she was used to hearing.

It wasn't from one of the Yakult[1] salesladies either.

When Tsuyu turned back to look out the door, a boy wearing a high school uniform was there straddling a bicycle and chewing on what looked to be bread. It was Touya.

Noticing Tsuyu poking her head out the door, Touya hurriedly finished swallowing his food.

"Good morning!" Touya cheerfully greeted.

"…G-Good morning," Tsuyu replied timidly, while still holding open her newspaper.

Who's this? What's going on?

I've been seen in my pajamas? Should I report him? Should I?

A pile of question marks ran through Tsuyu's head.

After staring at her carefully, Touya asked a question.

"Could you be Hinooka's little sister?"

Tsuyu simply nodded.

Touya then took out his cell phone and confirmed the time.

"…Is Homura still sleeping?"

Tsuyu nodded again and then, after a moment, quickly ran back inside and up to the second floor of the house.

"Homura, Homura!"

She sprang into Homura's room without knocking and tore off the bed covers as she woke up Homura, who was sleeping while rolled up into a ball on her bed.

"Wake up, Homura!"

"…What is it… I'm still sleepy, you know…"

Homura looked at Tsuyu with half-closed eyes.

"I said someone's at the door!"

"……We could use some Joa[2]…"

"Not the Yakult saleslady! An unknown guy! Someone you know? A former boyfriend? A stalker!? Should I report him?"

"…Eeh~? Who is it now…?"

She sluggishly crawled out of bed with her hands and feet and headed towards the window to look outside.

Her younger sister's sense of gravity, which was quite lacking in the first place, had utterly failed to fully wake Homura.

"Homura, your front button!"

Homura leaned out the window.

Tsuyu quickly moved behind her and covered the open front of Homura's pajamas.

Touya waved his hand from the front porch.

"Good morning, Hinooka! Are you finally awake? Hurry up and come down!"

"……"

Homura finally stopped staring down absently as her eyes came into focus.

"What are you doing in front of my house, Touya-kun?"

"What are you talking about? I already told you yesterday, remember?"

"What was it again?"

"Running. We agreed to go running together!"

"…Ah… Ah… Right, right. I did promise that."

"Are you okay?"

"Sorry, just wait there a bit."

"I'm not waiting more than five minutes."

After bringing her head back inside and closing the window, Homura began to sluggishly change clothes.

She put on some exercise clothing that she had almost never used. She had bought it at some point in the past to match the tastes of her boyfriend at the time.

"Should I do your hair?" Tsuyu asked in a sunken tone.

"Hmm, no, it's fine."

After slipping off her pajamas, Homura turned to face the mirror of her dresser and nodded in relief. She removed the cleaning shop tag attached to her shirt.

"I can't make him wait too long. It's my fault for sleeping in, after all—all right, this will do," Homura said as she picked up a running cap.

"Who is that guy?" Tsuyu asked with a suspicious face.

There were a lot of things she wanted to ask, but that was what concerned her the most.

"Hmm? He's a friend from school."

"Ah, right, he's wearing a Seiran High uniform… So, is he your new boyfriend?"

"Things would be simpler if that were the case."

Tsuyu went over to the window and peeked down at the front porch through the curtains.

The boy in question, with nothing else to do, was doing some trick moves with his bicycle on the spot.

"…Homura, is that kind of person to your taste?"

"Like I said, he's not my boyfriend," Homura said as she skillfully tied her hair back behind her head. With her cap on as well, it was just right. "The truth is, I don't really understand it either."

Tsuyu stared reproachfully at Homura, who looked good no matter what she wore.

"In any case, it seems he'll be coming here every morning from now on."

Homura suddenly said something outrageous right at the start of the morning.

It would have turned into a scene of carnage if their father was still around to hear that.

"Eh? Every morning!? Hey, wait, M-Mom…!?"

Just as she tried to seek aid from her mother downstairs, Tsuyu heard the sound of the front door opening, and she rushed to the window again.

There, she saw her mother Serina just as she was going outside.

She was handing a glass of juice to Touya, who was politely greeting her with a bow.

"I already told Mom about it yesterday evening."

"Gununu… A-At least meet in the evening instead…"

"All right, perfect."

Homura finished dressing herself in front of the mirror. Emotionally, at least, she felt like a competent athlete.

She had to make Touya wait another ten minutes in order to wash her face.

As Homura did so, Tsuyu could hear the bright conversation between Touya and her mother as they acted friendly with each other.

Now that it had come to this, Tsuyu had no choice but to seek backing from her father.

"Ah, that's right. Tsuyu, lend me your shoes."

"Use your own!"

Lunch break.

Homura resolutely bowed her head in apology to her lunch friends.

"I'm sorry, Makino-san and everyone. I'm going to be spending lunch elsewhere for a while starting today… I really am sorry!"

Homura prostrated herself in apology with both hands on her desk.

"…What did you just say?"

In the classroom during lunch break.

The other girls who were sitting with their desk arranged together looked like ominous silhouettes with the sunlight from the window at their backs.

They laced their fingers together while resting their elbows on their desks and solemnly whispered to each other.

"It's a boy." "It's a boy." "She won't come back anymore." "It was a short friendship."

Makino propped one leg on a chair and leaned forward threateningly.

"Hey, Hinooka. If we make it look like ya can leave our turf and make yourself respectable so easily, it'll set a bad example, ya know?"

"……" Homura trembled in silence.

"Shall I floor ya…?"

Makino made her hand into a finger pistol and thrust it before Homura's face.

Her finger lightly touched Homura's cheek, making her jump with a start.

"Hyah."

"…Hinooka-san, you have an eraser imprint on your face."

"Eh…? N-No way."

"You were dozing off on your desk earlier."

"Ah, you're right. The brand [NOMO] is etched on her face." "No, it's not."

"Then how about [Dostellar][1]?" "No!"

Laughter filled the area around the group of desks, with Homura half-crying half-laughing in the center.

Makino spoke gently.

"You decided to participate in the Boxed Lunch Contest during the Shinryoku Festival, right?"

"Y-Yeah."

There was a large boxed lunch in the bag Homura held, along with a recipe magazine underneath it.

Appearance-wise, it was quite 'simple', but being easily understood was one of Homura's good points.

"Is that so?"

"Then, that means you'll be busy for two weeks. Good luck."

"Who's going to taste-test it? I feel a bit envious."

"Yeah. What a shame. Talking with you is always interesting, Hinooka-san."

"At first, I thought you were a quieter person, and it was a bit hard making retorts to you."

"How to put it, it's like you always do counter-throws, I guess?"

"Counter-throws?" Was that from some fighting game?

"Right, right. It's like you wait for the other person to make a retort to a joke and then you throw in the opposite direction with a heave." "I don't get it at all." "To put it another way, you have the courage to toy with others."

At that moment, Homura felt like she had returned to the happy atmosphere of when she was in middle school.

With reluctance, she left the class.

"……"

Homura inadvertently looked over the classroom as she left, but Kujou-san wasn't anywhere to be seen in the classroom at lunch time today as well.

"So, how was the running?"

"It wasn't so hard."

"Liar. You were gasping for breath when we went up the hill."

Near the lawn in the courtyard, there was a wooden deck spread out with benches arranged on it. It looked a bit like a park.

This was a popular spot that was quickly filled up during lunch time, but Homura and Touya had luckily managed to secure a bench for themselves. Rather, the people around them might have been trying to be considerate. After all, there was nothing but couples on all the other benches…

"We didn't have enough time today, so I cut the course in half. We'll be running double the distance tomorrow."

"Wait, that's too sudden!"

Relaxing into a cross-legged posture on the bench, Touya stared pointedly at Homura.

"Even if you're lucky and manage to win in the Shinryoku Festival, you can't just suddenly start participating in the Exploration Club's activities without any training."

"I know."

Homura nodded as she clenched her fist.

"Basic stamina is important, right? I read that much."

"Oh."

Touya raised an eyebrow in surprise.

"You finally read the Exploration Club pamphlet?"

"Well… it's hard to read, so just a little."

"That alone is enough. Then, I guess I'll dig into this."

There were two boxed lunches on the bench between Homura and Touya.

"May I?"

"…Go ahead."

Homura nodded with a tense expression.

Touya opened the lid and peeked into the boxed lunch.

"It looks normal."

"…R-Really?"

Homura poured them both cups of soup from a thermos flask.

"Thanks for the food!"

"You're welcome… Then, I'll also dig in…"

Homura gave him a cup and timidly picked up her own boxed lunch.

Touya vigorously brandished his chopsticks and began gulping down the food.

After his first bite, he was expressionless.

After his second bite, his expression become dubious, and after his third bite, it turned to certainty and he grimaced.

"……kuh…!"

He gulped down some soup to get rid of the taste until he finally recovered.

"……"

Touya silently glared at Homura.

"……Hinooka."

"H-How was it?"

"Could it be that this is your first time cooking?"

"I didn't mention it?"

"This is the first time I'm hearing it."

Thinking it might be some misunderstanding, Touya cleared his feelings and tried another bite, but the result didn't change.

"…Hinooka. Regardless of the taste, I'm the one being fed here, so I won't say, 'It's terrible'."

"But you just said it, didn't you?"

"However, do you really have the guts to challenge the Boxed Lunch Contest where girls who have received training in the Home Economics Club will be participating? Are you sure you aren't trying for the Humor Prize instead?"

"D-Do you really have to go that far?"

"Hey, you. What's that?"

"Eh? …This?"

With a CG-like smile, Homura hid her own boxed lunch behind her back.

"It's just a boxed lunch, you know?"

"The contents look completely different from mine. What's with that?"

It was easy to tell at a glance that the lunch box that Homura was hiding had been made by her mother.

"B-But, my mother always makes three persons' worth of food by mistake, so it gets divided between me, my father and my little sister."

"Hooh."

"Come on, that's my first prototype boxed lunch, right? The ingredients originally came from perfectly good leftovers, and it would have been a waste to throw it all away and release extra carbon dioxide into the atmosphere from cooking more, you know?"

"Why do I have to be considerate of the environment and you get to eat human food?"

Touya pressed his boxed lunch at Homura's face.

"Eat this yourself. Why do these omelettes taste like coffee, anyway? Aah?"

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry."

Homura quickly gave in.

Her expression then turned serious and she murmured softly.

"How about we take turns sampling it? Or we can decide by Russian Roulette—"

"Don't be stupid. Properly make two persons' worth starting tomorrow. In the contest, you'll have to make food for five people. Consider it practice."

"Uuugh, roger."

Well, she had been vaguely away of it when she tasted samples during her struggle to cook at home last night.

Homura had brought a cooking magazine along with her, but today it appeared she wasn't at the point where she could even consult it yet.

However, it wasn't in Homura's nature to let herself be one-sidedly criticized.

Within her, (unjustified) anger boiled up.

For instance, about this morning's run—

"…Hey, by the way, why do only I have to run while you get to ride a bicycle, Touya-kun? Isn't that unfair?"

"It's to raise your stamina, remember! I had already finished my morning training before I came to meet you!"

"Ooh, as expected of a sports boy."

In that case, just how early had he gotten up this morning?

It was all completely foreign and unknown territory to Homura.

"Touya-kun, don't you have friends who you eat boxed lunches with?"

"Ah, no, I don't," Touya answered nonchalantly.

"…I see, sorry for bringing it up."

"Well, I prefer eating bread instead of boxed lunches, but regardless, I usually eat at recess after second or third period at school. The other guys are also like that."

"A-An early lunch, huh? Then what do you do during lunch break?"

"Basketball."

True, Homura could hear the sounds of balls bouncing off the ground and shouts from the other side of the school building that surrounded the courtyard where she and Touya were.

"Sorry for taking up your time here."

"It's fine. It's just playing around. And yet, when I told the others that I was going to be absent for a while in order to eat lunch with you, they strangled me and flipped me over by grabbing my legs. Geez, I should feed this stuff to those guys instead!"

"Haha… Please use discretion."

Afterwards, the two of them divided the prototype boxed lunch between them and ate while occasionally groaning "Aah" or "Ugh".

Above, a silver midday moon could be seen floating sublimely in the blue sky.

"Hey, Touya-kun."

"Yeah?"

"Is Nutella far away?"

"Do you want to go there?"

"No, not really."

"What's with that?" Touya grumbled with a disappointed expression.

"Rather, most of that pamphlet was pretty much unreadable for me. It was full of nothing but threatening warnings of some kind."

"It can't be helped. It's for the sake of protecting the investigators."

"With all that, it's going to be hard convincing my father…"

"Is that so? My dad gave the okay pretty easily, so I can't give you any advice on that."

Touya's eyes were serious as he gazed at the moon.

"Your mother was acting pretty supportive, but she seems to be misunderstanding the boxed lunches. Well, there are times when poison might get mixed into our meals when we explore. I guess I'll use this as a kind of rehearsal."

"You're going as far as to say that the boxed lunch I spent all night making is poison?"

Homura handed Touya more soup while muttering in self-deprecation.

Accepting the cup, Touya bowed his head apologetically.

"…No, I'm sorry. I said too much."

"That you did."

"Don't worry about it. Just bring it on. I'll taste as much of your food as it takes."

Homura bowed her head laudably.

"I'm the one who should be grateful here. To tell the truth, I can't really rely on anyone else for this."

—Because it's too embarrassing!

Touya returned his gaze to the sky as he resumed speaking.

"Nutella's location has nothing to do with distance. I'm still in the midst of studying the theory of teleportation and have only experienced going there twice so far, though."

"Really? Distance is irrelevant?"

"Yeah. In the end, it's determined according to the person going there. Nutella is a mathematical existence, so getting there is determined by the results of the teleportation calculation—by your perception."

"A mathematical existence…"

Leaving aside the actual contents of the Exploration Club's activities, the pamphlet's explanation section on the makeup of the Imaginary Earth had instantly made her sleepy.

Staying ignorant like this would be troublesome for Homura if she intended to become a mage, though.

"The way to understand it is the exact opposite of our Earth."

"What do you mean?"

"Look, the Earth is actually round, but we use flat maps, right? That's just because it's easier to record that way. In truth, maps are inaccurate and incomplete since they can't show things like the surface area, direction and distance in equally sufficient detail. In order to really know the shape and appearance of the Earth, you can only go directly to the place in question or look down at it from space."

"Ah, that example is easy to understand," Homura said with a nod.

"…In that case, Nutella is instead closer to being like a map than the real thing."

"That's what the pamphlet seemed to say. It was too complicated for me."

It was at that point that Homura belatedly realized something.

"Is it okay to tell me these kinds of things even though I'm not a formal member of the Exploration Club yet?"

Touya laughed as he saw Homura watch her surroundings nervously.

"This much information can be easily found on the net. There doesn't seem to have been cases of successful teleportation in the civilian sector yet, but you can research it yourself if you're interested."

"I don't use computers. My cell phone is enough to send text messages."

Touya reacted in shock.

"Seriously? Being computer-savvy is an indispensable skill in the Exploration Club. Didn't you at least learn about how to do net searches?"

Saying that, Touya took out a cell phone… or rather, something that looked like one.

It was similar to a recent model released by a big company, but it had an unfamiliar subdued coloring.

"Ooh, so cool! Hmm…? Is that cell phone perhaps the rumored one with a transmitter attached for twenty-four hour surveillance purposes…?"

"Transmitter? You mean the GPS? Yeah, it's one of the provisions of the Exploration Club. And it's a terminal, not a cell phone. It'd be bad if it was stolen and misused, so it only works in certain locations. But regardless, it really is amazing."

Touya proudly flipped open his terminal and showed it off to Homura.

And right at that instant, a call came in. The way it vibrated and lit up was just like that of a normal cell phone.

"…Oh? It's the club president."

"!?"

Homura instinctively went on guard at the mention of the club president.

Touya unlocked the terminal and answered the call.

"Yes, Touya here."

"…Isn't it a cell phone if you can take calls?" Homura grumbled.

"Ah, yes. Sorry—Yes. I'll be careful from now on."

The call ended in less than ten seconds.

Homura inched closer on the bench in order to try and listen in, but it ended before she could do so, making her click her tongue.

On the other hand, Touya put away his terminal in his pocket in a slightly dejected manner.

"What's wrong, young lad?"

"I got scolded. She told me not to show the terminal to outsiders."

"Huh?"

Homura nervously stood up from the bench and surveyed the courtyard once more.

The school was peaceful with the sound of the lunchtime ruckus filling the grounds as usual… but the darkness of the hallways and the shadows of the rooftop water tank all looked conspicuously suspicious to her.

"So you really are being monitored…!?"

Chapter 4 END

1 Yakult: a probiotic dairy product that is basically like yogurt milk and is a staple drink in Japan.
2 Joa: a particular brand of Yakult milk.
3 MONO and Dostellar are both eraser brands in Japan.

thumbs up
can you hurry up and go?

Chapter 5

A rainy morning.

Homura's room was dimmer than usual.

After stopping her ringing alarm clock, Homura felt that something was out of place.

"Ah, that's right…"

Today was Sunday.

One week had passed since she started running and making boxed lunches.

Touya had told her to take a break today, but she'd forgotten to turn off her alarm clock.

Strangely, her body didn't feel tired. Her muscles had been in terrible pain the first two or three days, but her body had gotten used to it soon after.

When she closed her eyes and listened to the rain outside, she felt as if she had returned to her depressed and gloomy self.

The week-long morning runs seemed unreal at that moment, as if they were all a dream.

After falling back asleep out of a coveting for indolence, Homura got up at noon and went out to Honmachi.

There was no sign of that woman at the station today. She glanced at the leaflets on the wall as usual as she went through the ticket gate.

She strolled along the boutiques in front of the station before arriving her destination.

It was a famous traditional Japanese restaurant that she had read about in a magazine.

It was primarily a restaurant, but they also sold boxed lunches at the storefront.

When Homura arrived there, they had just opened up for the afternoon hours, and she was able to buy freshly made boxed lunches after standing in line for only a short time.

Having no motivation to immediately return home, Homura headed to the nearby shopping mall and took a seat at the food court.

"Oh right, gotta take a picture."

After splitting apart her chopsticks, she realized she had forgotten to take a picture first, and she hurriedly put down her chopsticks. While holding back her hunger, she used her phone's camera to take pictures of the boxed lunch from various angles for the sake of study.

The taste was good, as expected. Plenty of nourishment was poured into it.

When she reflected on her own efforts, she recalled how she had finally been shouted at by her taste-tester yesterday.

How is it that only the appearance of it has improved despite the fact that the taste hasn't changed at all? he asked.

There are things you need to do before adding in anything like octopus or rabbit decorations, he said.

But no matter what she did, it seemed like Homura killed the taste of her ingredients the more she cooked them.

She was bad at things that took time to do.

Therefore, she wasn't suited for cooking.

Even this boxed lunch wasn't all that impressive in terms of appearance. Though she had studied the photos of it, it didn't look that tasty to her, so much so that she even disdainfully thought that her own boxed lunches surpassed it.

But when she properly tasted it like this, she would strangely come to think that a gaudy appearance was unnecessary and that this kind of plain decoration was actually the best.

In the center of the food court's atrium, there was a wide pillar with screens showing news reports on it.

Noticing it, Homura glanced at the news and talk shows being displayed, and a broadcast about the Imaginary Earth caught her eye. Though much less compared to the name of the UNPIEP, the name of the Exploration Club came up often. In particular, the image of the Exploration Club advisor from a public high school in Osaka being interviewed as a commentator appeared several times. He seemed like a kind and interesting teacher.

If I'm going to enter the Exploration Club, I'd rather join his instead. Such thoughts brushed through Homura's mind.

Of course, that was realistically impossible, and she didn't think they would accept her over there if she failed to join the Exploration Club at Seiran High.

And though she was currently chasing it off to the farthest corner of her thoughts, there was also the matter of her studies.

Well, she was in quite a pinch in all regards.

Suddenly, she noticed a shadow fall over her table, and she looked up.

"Are these seats empty?"

A group of three boys with jingling keys hanging from their pants stood in front of her. They were probably university students or older high school students. They had matching fired-up hairstyles. She could smell the hairdressing product even from this distance.

"Ah, go ahead."

Due to the rainy weather, a lot of the seats in the food court were empty.

While feeling bad about it inside, Homura brought a boxed lunch from outside the mall and bought only drinks here before sitting down, but for these guys to purposefully approach her in this situation…

Their goal was, of course, to hit on her.

"Are you alone?"

Speaking of which, it had been a while since she had last come to Honmachi by herself.

"No, I'm waiting for someone," she replied with a forced apologetic smile.

"Eh, that's wrong, right? It looks like you've been sitting here alone for a while."

They ignored her indirect hint.

"Or have you been stood up?"

"Ah, it does look that way."

Just as expected, things were becoming troublesome.

Even though boys all talked to her quite kindly when they were by themselves, for some reason they became absurdly competitive the moment there were two or three of them together.

While knowing it wouldn't work, she checked her cell phone's texts and made a disappointed expression.

"I'm not getting any replies, so I guess I'll give up and go home now."

"Then that means you have nothing to do. You have some free time, right?"

It's true I had lots of free time. Until now, that is. You guys are a week too late.

"Rather than that gloomy boxed lunch, how about you eat some grilled meat or grilled meat with us?"

"Hey, what's with the overblown meat appeal there, dude?"

"No, no, this is quite tasty, actually."

Ah, she said something unnecessary.

"Really? How tasty? Please tell us."

"Eh? Err…"

"If you're not going to eat anymore, how about giving some to me?" "Like I said, your gluttonous streak is coming out too much, dude."

Homura was being gradually pressured.

Since her seat faced the handrail of the atrium, she was in a difficult position to quickly get up from.

She wouldn't be able to get up unless she stood between the chairs and pushed the other guys aside.

She thought about pretending to cry since it was troublesome, but that would be a declaration of defeat in its own way to her, so she didn't want to. She disliked the idea of making matters serious by calling for the local security guards even more.

"Sorry for making you wait."

Just when she was troubled over what to do, a husky voice rang out.

However, the owner of the voice was hidden from Homura's sight behind the backs of the boys.

"Eh, who?"

When they turned around, a single girl stood there.

She was somewhat shorter than Homura and had a wild atmosphere about her.

She had a slightly long, wolf-cut hairstyle. She carried a wind instrument case over her shoulder, and the case was covered with stickers, giving off a rock punk image. Her clothing perfectly matched that impression as well, making it look as if she really was about to stand on stage.

"Yes, yes, sorry."

She forcefully cut through the smooth-talking boys and sat down next to Homura.

"Here."

"Y-Yes?"

Going with the flow, Homura received the instrument case from the girl.

"Hey, are you a friend of this girl?"

"That's right. Got a problem with that?"

The girl, who Homura had met for the first time today, replied nonchalantly.

"Right?" she said as she turned to Homura seeking agreement, to which Homura could only nod repeatedly.

"No, she just said 'Who?' a second ago, didn't she?"

Yes, that she did.

"You really can't follow along, can you?" the girl said as she glared at Homura.

"Ah!"

One of the boys suddenly cried out.

"This girl is Kamikoma from Hiyoshi."

"Geh!" "Kamikoma… wait, y-you idiot!"

The boys suddenly went into a panic and surveyed their surroundings.

They were just like herbivores from the Savanna who were wary of predators, despite the fact that they'd been making such a fuss about meat earlier.

"This girl? Idiot?"

The girl called Kamikoma expressionlessly tilted her head.

"A-Ah, no, sorry."

"Pipsqueak? Tiny breasts? Small-boned and scrawny?"

"W-We didn't say any of that!"

"Oh my, are you guys free right now? How about I treat you all to some tea?"

"We're sorry. Please forgive us!"

"We're sorry!" "Sorry!"

After pitifully bowing their heads in apology, the boys left the food court.

No, it would be more accurate to say that they ran away. Homura didn't understand the reason why at all.

Though Kamikoma is short and had thin arms, they say she's actually a master at hand-to-hand combat…

They say there's actually a hammer covered in thorns in her case…

Well, leaving all that aside—

"Thank you very much."

Homura stood up from her chair while holding the case and bowed her head in thanks.

"It's fine. You seem like you're used to that kind of treatment. You wouldn't have had any trouble with them even without me."

"That's not true at all. You really saved me there."

"It's just because they were being a bit of an eyesore."

After saying that, Kamikoma stretched her arms and looked around the food court.

"Oh, there she is," she muttered and then waved her hand. "Sorry about that, Orie. Over here."

By Orie, could she mean…

"You really did make me wait, you know."

Kamikoma turned around and smiled mischievously.

The one who appeared before them was Homura's classmate Kujou Orie.

She wore a black formal dress and bolero jacket. She held a violin case in her hands.

Unlike Kamikoma, she gave off the impression of a classical music performer.

Her current adult atmosphere made her seem quite different from when she was wearing the school uniform.

"Hinooka-san…"

"Like I thought, it's you, Kujou-san. What a coincidence!"

Kamikoma looked back and forth between the two of them.

"Do you know her, Orie?"

"……"

Kujou remained silent with an indecipherable expression.

"Hey, Orie."

Homura reflexively interjected between them.

"Ah, yes, we're classmates. We've been together since middle school," she explained as brightly as possible.

Resting her chin on her hands, Kamikoma looked at Kujou in expectation.

But the girl in question merely frowned.

"It… might not be a coincidence. A lot of students from Seiran High tend to come here."

"Ah, that's true."

"…Won't you introduce me?" Kamikoma asked.

Letting out a small sigh, Kujou began to speak.

"This is Kamikoma Sera-senpai. She's a third year at Hiyoshi High."

Like I thought, she's older than us, Homura thought as her guess based on Kamikoma's attitude was confirmed.

…That meant that, though it was rude to say, she was naturally quite short.

But the presence she gave off didn't give that feeling at all.

"My father and Kamikoma-senpai's mother know each other through their music-related work, and that's how senpai and I came to meet—and this here is Hinooka Homura-san."

"Nice to meet you, Hinooka-san."

Homura shook Kamikoma's offered hand.

Taking back her case from Homura, Kamikoma pointed at it and spoke.

"By the way, this is a sax."

"Sax…?"

"A saxophone."

"Ooh." …But even if she was told that, Homura only vaguely understood what it was.

But she at least knew what instrument Kujou held.

"You have a violin, right, Kujou-san? So you play the violin. That's amazing."

"…Not really. This is all I have."

Kujou turned her face away.

"There you go being modest again. Both of your outfits are also perfect… Did you two come from a concert?"

"No, we're going to one now. We were actually thinking of eating here first before going, but I was late due to some circumstances—"

Suddenly, Kamikoma clapped her hands together in epiphany.

Kujou narrowed her eyes as if she had a bad premonition.

"If you like, would you come listen to our live concert?"

"A live concert! Yay! Is it really okay!?"

"Of course. It's over at [Rhapso], beyond the arcade."

"Ah, I know that live music club! Please allow me to go!"

"…Minors aren't allowed in tonight, though," Kujou interjected.

"True, minors can't enter, but it'll be fine if my name is mentioned."

"Ooh, the legendary backstage pass?"

"Also, you might end up sharing a table, but you're fine with that, right?"

"I don't mind."

"All right then. We have to do a rehearsal, so we'll be going ahead first. Hinooka-san, the concert starts at 6:30."

"Thank you so much! I look forward to it."

In that case, she wished she had chosen to wear appropriate clothing beforehand.

As they walked away side by side, Kamikoma and Kujou looked like their positions as senior and junior were reversed based on their appearance, but Kujou really did seem like a junior in the way she nodded along to Kamikoma's talking, which Homura found amusing, somehow.

Just as they were leaving the food court, Kamikoma stopped and turned to Kujou.

"Ah, I have to go to the toilet. And I think I'll go buy some light food too. Go ahead and wait for me, Orie."

"All right."

After dispassionately saying goodbye, Kujou headed to the mall's escalator.

But, after waving her hand, Kamikoma once again went back to Homura and sat back down on a chair with her knees on top.

"…?"

While holding onto the handrail, Kamikoma watched Kujou go down the escalator that pierced through the atrium.

Homura also followed suit and watched her go down.

"Kujou-san is quite cute."

The small senpai gave a small nod.

"Are you Orie's friend?" Kamikoma asked once again.

"Yes… at least, I feel that way…"

"I see. Is Orie fitting in at school?"

"E-Err."

"That girl is shy towards strangers, and she has a bit of trouble with words."

What was she like in middle school?—Shamefully, Homura didn't remember at all.

"If I remember right, Hiyoshi High is also…"

"That's right. It's a university-preparatory high school just like Seiran. I invited Orie to attend there, but that girl decided on her current course herself. Probably out of opposition towards her parents."

"Is that so? She really is amazing… Completely different from me, who leaves things to others."

"Hinooka-san."

Kamikoma turned back to face Homura.

"I have an earnest request to ask of you. It's about Orie."

"Yes?"

"I won't tell you to get along with her. Asking you won't change anything. But, if that girl is being bullied, could you tell me? Because she would never tell me about it herself."

Kamikoma-senpai seemed to be worrying about Kujou from the bottom of her heart.

Even so, what could Homura promise when she herself was flustered over not finding a place of her own at school?

"No one in our class is like that. Please don't worry in that regard. Also, I do seriously want to get closer to Kujou-san myself."

Homura clenched her fist as she answered Kamikoma.

“Is that so?”

Kamikoma patted her chest in relief.

“Sorry for suddenly saying something like this when we just met today.”

“You’re kind of like a handsome boy, Kamikoma-senpai.”

“Stop with the handsome bit. At least call me manly.”

Homura managed to easily enter the live music club.

When she went down the atmospheric illuminated stairs, she arrived at a hall that was quite vast in comparison to the narrowness of the entrance.

She had prepared herself to seem out of place since minors weren’t normally allowed in, but, to her surprise, half of the audience were foreigners.

The checkered-tile stage was illuminated by amber lights, making it seem as if you were looking at it through a glass of whiskey. There was a grand piano placed at a corner of the stage. Recording cameras were also set up in the back.

“Ooh, this is the legendary… jazz! Isn’t it!?”

Homura wondered whether it was the jazz that her father sometimes listened to.

All the songs sounded exactly the same to Homura, though.

Just as she was guided through the dim audience seating and arrived at her table, the musical performance suddenly began.

Unlike the concerts Homura was used to seeing, the curtains were calmly raised without any clapping or cheers.

Musicians carrying instruments like trumpets, bass and slightly strange-looking acoustic guitars stood on stage and performed their music while swaying their bodies. As expected, there were a lot of foreign musicians.

In a certain sense, the short Kamikoma-senpai greatly stood out among them as she played her sax.

“Kujou-san is…”

There was no sign of Kujou on the stage. However, Homura did get the sense that violins weren’t suited for jazz.

Homura became engrossed in the performance, but she noticed the person sharing the same table with her when drinks were brought over.

“…Ah.”

“……”

She met the eyes of the other person, who had been staring at her.

Homura nodded in greeting, and the other person also quietly nodded with her eyelids closed.

The person was a girl with beautiful long hair, who seemed to be a minor as well and was probably Kamikoma-senpai’s friend.

She was so startlingly beautiful that it was obvious even in the darkness of the audience seating, and Homura ended up ignoring the performance as she gazed at the other girl. Her memory circuits started working at full processing power whenever she saw someone overwhelmingly beautiful.

“……”

The other girl lifted her glass slightly and bashfully pointed at the stage.

"Ah… sorry."

Homura returned to sanity.

The pleasant performance continued, and after several songs, Kujou appeared on the stage.

Surrounded by the tall (except for one) musicians on the stage, Kujou's white shoulders visibly stood out. She looked like a small queen in her black dress.

"Uooh, she really is pretty, as expected."

Homura let out a sigh of admiration.

The performance resumed. Based on the time, this piece would probably be the last one.

When her violin entered the melody, the rest of the band lowered their volume and acted as support for her performance.

Homura felt a shiver run down the back of her neck. The way Kujou moved her fingers was so skillful and beautiful.

Kujou's performance was a shock to Homura as she heard it for the first time.

Homura had felt that jazz was music without a protagonist since there was no conductor and the melody was complex. On the other hand, the violin, a classical solo instrument, could be likened to a lump of self-assertion shrieked and shouted.

And yet, the violin that Kujou played seemed to speak joyful in concert with the melody of the surrounding instruments.

"—What melody is this?"

"'How High the Moon'."

The girl next to her answered Homura's unthinking murmur. She also seemed a bit excited.

Kujou-san's serious expression came apart as she smiled happily.

It was the first time Homura had seen her smile.

The band's performance also swelled in pitch alongside the violin, and when they reached the climax, Kujou finished passionately strumming her violin and the performance ended.

The entire audience stood up and applauded. Whistles and cheers showered the stage.

Homura also leapt up from her seat and put all the deep emotion she felt into her clapping.

Kujou-san turned bright red as she was hugged by a foreign guitar musician.

"Aha."

Looking closely, Kamikoma-senpai was also being hugged by someone beside.

"Hmm?"

When she looked back at her table, the other person was no longer there.

The one hugging Kamikoma-senpai, or rather tightly embracing her to the point of pushing her down, was that beautiful girl. Kamikoma-senpai seemed to be at a loss as she wore a timid expression.

Suddenly remembering the thirst of her throat, Homura took a sip of her drink, but immediately frowned.

"T-This is alcohol… a cocktail?"

Chapter 5 END

chew
chew

Chapter 6

The Shinryoku Festival was three days away.

To the participants in the [Boxed Lunch Contest] who had to buy their ingredients beforehand and prepare the day before the contest, it already felt like it was tomorrow.

On the other hand, the posters of the festival's main project, the "Yamato Nadeshiko Contest", had been upgraded for some reason, with pictures of the participating female students affixed to them.

It increased the atmosphere of a beauty contest even further.

"So they do these kinds of preparatory measures…" Homura mumbled as she leaned forward to gaze at a Yamato Nadeshiko poster.

"They just put them up on their own. Actually, did they even get the person's permission for this one…? Ouch."

Beside her, Touya frowned as he gazed at the same poster.

The pictures that had been chaotically affixed to the posters included both portraits that seemed to have been self-taken and print-outs of photos that had clearly been taken without asking consent. Since the contest winner had the right to double their club's budget as the grand prize, everyone was using every means available to win, as expected.

"Should I also take a picture of myself!? Like, a picture of me wearing a hat like that of a strong man and crossing my arms proudly with the heading [I'll make your boxed lunch!]."

"There's no point in that. The exhibited boxed lunches are judged anonymously—ouch."

"Right. Yeah, I understand."

"I wonder if they're advertising themselves with their clubs—geh."

Standing next to Homura, Touya was knocked on the back of the head and received a jab to his flank by the boys walking through the hallway as they passed by.

He had already gotten used to it and become resigned to it. Homura didn't dare make any quips about it either.

Speaking of which, what was the prize for winning the [Boxed Lunch Contest]? She had only been concerned about the conditions for entering the Exploration Club and hadn't paid any attention to that part.

As she was about to move on down the hallway, Homura suddenly caught sight of a certain picture.

"Cosplay like this is still popular, huh…"

As Homura spoke in admiration, Touya followed her gaze.

"Cosplay? Which one… Ah, eh?"

Touya spurted out in shock.

Homura wasn't knowledgeable about it, but it was probably a costume of a character from some anime or game. The signature pose towards the camera was also perfect.

"……"

Touya's eyes were glued to the picture.

"Hoh, so your tastes lean this way, Touya-kun? Actually, which class is this girl from?"

It was a girl that Homura had no memory of as far as she knew.

Since she was participating in this contest, she should be a first-year. She was quite a cute girl with an exotic atmosphere, someone Homura would definitely carve into her memory.

"Do you know something about her? Hmm~, why are you averting your face?"

"No… it's just… you know…"

Touya was flustered as he faltered to speak.

It was rare to see a guy who was so bad at keeping secrets.

"This girl is a transfer student."

An arm suddenly stretched out and tore off the picture from the wall.

Ah, how cruel. What's this person doing?

"…Sensei?"

The one standing behind them was, once again, Professor Fujimori.

Homura nodded in comprehension.

"A transfer student, huh? I see, no wonder I don't recall seeing her before. What class is she in?"

"Don't inquire any further about her."

"Haah, okay…"

Touya patted his chest in relief. Well, she could just question him about it later.

"Sensei, what a coincidence to meet you here. Are we really being monitored?"

"What are you talking about? In the first place, the staff room is right over there, you know?"

"Don't mind Hinooka. She seems to be a bit of a day-dreamer."

As Homura became miffed at those words, Fujimori questioned her.

"So, Hinooka, how's your prospects for winning the contest?"

"I'm sure to win."

Homura responded with the signature pose she had learned just now.

"…You really are a day-dreamer, aren't you?"

As Fujimori glared at her with scornful eyes, Homura nestled up to her.

"Sensei, could you let me use the Exploration Club's cooking room? It's such an impressive facility, so it has at least one portable cooking stove, right?"

"Well, we do have one. But what are you going to use it for?"

"To cook, of course. I can't use the home economics room, after all."

"Huh? Isn't it open for student-use after school?"

Fujimori looked over at Touya.

"It's not like I can't go in, but that place is full of enemies. It'd be hard to cook there, and it basically makes the secret information battle completely exposed…"

However, Fujimori curtly refused the greedy-sounding Homura.

"Rejected."

"Come on, don't say that."

"No. And don't get carried away dozing off in class either."

Fujimori lightly smacked Homura with a curled-up textbook.

"It is general rule that only club members and authorized staff can enter the clubroom. Do your recipe experimentation at your own home."

After saying just that, Fujimori promptly left to return to the staff room.

Homura vented her frustration at the teacher's retreating back.

"And yet you call yourself a teacher~? You look the worst in jeans in this entire school, you know! It's because I can't do that that I'm asking you! And I brought all my tools from home too…"

Touya's shoulders drooped.

"Can't be helped. How about you come over to my place?"

"Oh, is that really all right?"

Touya reluctantly nodded.

"I also bear some responsibility for this—ack."

A boy passing by once more smacked Touya's head from behind.

After school.

Touya's home was in a set of apartments erected on a hill.

It was one station away from the nearest station to the Hinooka home.

Touya was pushing his bike up the hill. Homura grumbled as she walked next to him.

"Tsuyu rebelling against me was completely unplanned for…"

"Well, don't begrudge your little sister too much."

"I know, but…"

What had happened was that Homura's younger sister Tsuyu, having been dumbstruck by Touya's daily visits, rose up in revolt and leaked the details and circumstances of Homura's entry into the [Boxed Lunch Contest] to their father.

As a result, Homura's father, who was still against her joining the Exploration Club, would extract the kitchen stove's gas pipes after supper every night.

Though she somehow managed to continue her morning running, practicing her cooking at home had been made difficult for her.

"Can't I ride on this?"

Homura pointed at the bike.

"Think about it, you're wearing a skirt. It'd be dangerous."

"I see… damn, how inconvenient…"

As she sustained the conversation by stating something obvious, Homura felt uneasy inside.

Since Touya wasn't bringing up the very crucial problem here, Homura asked him as nonchalantly as possible.

"By the way, are your parents at home, Touya-kun?"

"Ah? No, they're not there. Don't worry about it."

Ugh, Homura groaned inwardly. The situation seemed to be escalating even further.

"Do you live alone, Touya-kun? Ah, or do both your parents work for a living…?"

"I don't technically live alone, but it's pretty much the same thing. My dad got a job transfer away from home. My mom is currently running away from home."

"Running away from home!?"

Touya calmly nodded.

A heavy topic suddenly had come out. Homura's polite and controlled expression quickly collapsed.

"T-T-T-Then, you're the only one at your house, Touya-kun?"

"I just said that, didn't I?"

The second stage alarm fiercely rang in her head.

Just what kind of nerves did this guy have to be able to easily "Come over to my house" under such circumstances?

Homura suddenly became hyper-aware of the public gaze and started looking around restlessly, while the boy in question called out to her without reservation.

After Touya put his bike in the bicycle parking lot, Touya ignored the elevator and led Homura up the stairs until they reached the entrance to Touya's apartment.

As expected, this amount of stairs wasn't enough to make Homura out of breath anymore. It seemed that the fruits of her running were having some effect on her body.

"I'm home."

"Pardon me for the intrusion…"

After Touya unlocked the door, Homura followed him in through the entranceway.

After giving a polite greeting even though she knew no one was home, Homura was a bit taken aback by the neat and tidy entranceway and the bright and colorful interior of the apartment.

"Go ahead and make yourself at home."

"R-Roger. Don't mind if I do…"

There was a wooden sword placed in the umbrella stand next to the front door.

"What's with this souvenir wooden sword here?"

Next to it, there was a short bamboo sword that she didn't recognize.

When she tried grasping its well-used handle, she was surprised by the weight.

"Heavy!"

Touya's voice rang through the hallway from his room, where he had headed to for a moment.

"That one's for practice swinging. You can use it even in the middle of the living room. Maybe I should teach you some practice swings while you're here."

"No, before that, I'd like you to teach me cooking…"

"The kitchen is over there. You can wash your hands there."

After Touya returned to the living room and began giving directions, Homura peeked at his room over his shoulder.

"Now then, let's check where the lewd books are—"

"Just what did you come here to do? You don't have much time left, you know!"

"Now, now, isn't just a little peek fine?"

Pushing onto Touya the cooking tools and ingredients she had brought, Homura casually trespassed into Touya's room.

Though she expected him to desperately stop her, the room's owner merely shrugged in exasperation, betraying her expectations once again.

"Wow… It's cleaner than my room."

"Really? Is your room that dirty?"

"Tsuyu is always getting angry at me about it—"

The six-tatami-sized room felt very spacious due to the lack of a bed. The only furniture present was a writing desk and bookshelf.

"Ooh, is this for kendo?"

There were trophies and badges lined up neatly on the top bookshelf. A picture of him with his dojo comrades was also placed there. Besides that, the bookshelf contained things like serial historical novels and bike magazines.

The desk was simple as well, with only things like reference books, a laptop and a small audio player placed on top of it.

"Are all kendo boys this stoic…? What about manga? Or lewd books?"

"You're so nosy. I hid the things I didn't want you to see just now."

"Hoh. So you do have them. Now where could they be?"

"Could you give it a rest already? You definitely won't find them."

"Are you sure about that? Ah, maybe you've got all your secrets collected together in your laptop—"

It was at that moment that a small photo frame on the desk caught her eye.

It showed a very young Touya together with a girl who looked to be in the latter half of elementary school.

"……"

As Homura suddenly found herself at a loss for words while gazing at that photo, Touya spoke up.

"That's me and my big sis."

"Your sister…?"

"I was still five years old and Nee-chan was in fifth grade when the photo was taken."

This was the first time Homura had heard of his sister, and there was no sign of her room in the Touya household.

While expecting the answer, Homura had to ask since she had touched upon the topic.

"…Did your sister… die?"

"Yeah."

Touya nodded as if it were nothing.

"If she were alive, she'd be an adult by now. She was always joking around and playing pranks on people, so I think she would have gotten along with you, Hinooka."

"Eh? What's that supposed to mean?"

In the photo, Touya was hugging a stuffed animal with a tearful face and his small older sister was smiling while holding his hand.

As he smiled and looked at the photo frame, Touya didn't say any more.

And Homura didn't pry any further either.

"So, how about it? Have you calmed down a bit after some depressing talk? Are you finally ready to do this seriously?"

"Sorry. I will gratefully make use of your kitchen."

"All right. Then I'll help from the sidelines too."

Homura stood in the kitchen wearing a borrowed apron.

Touya brought his study kit to the dining table and watched Homura work from a close enough distance that their voices could reach each other.

Homura was moving her hands as she strived to make boxed lunches, but her mouth moved even more.

Touya was looking over his notes, but couldn't manage to concentrate well.

"Since you mentioned a job transfer, what kind of work does your father do, Touya-kun?"

"He's a police detective."

"Wow, a detective? This is the first time I've met someone related to the police. Was the person shown in the kendo hall photo earlier your father?"

The photo next to the one featuring the dojo gathering displayed a masculine-looking man in protective armor with a towel wrapped around his head standing next to Touya, who truly looked like a kendo boy in the photo.

"Yeah. That photo was taken when we went to the local dojo a while ago."

"Your father looked really strong."

"Yeah, he's so strong that it can piss you off."

"Then the reason you did kendo was because of your father's influence, right?"

"Something like that."

"Did you really use two swords? Isn't that rare?"

"I guess. There happened to be a good teacher at the dojo. Also, I hated the idea of doing the same thing as my dad."

"Well, I can't really tell them apart, but they're both a form of kendo either way. The key point to it was that, right? The mentality of a boy who wishes to surpass his father."

While sitting, Touya stretched and raised his arms to either side.

"Don't you think that Sasaki Kojiro would have won against Musashi if he had used two-sword style[1]?"

"Hah? What're you talking about?"

Homura suddenly turned around.

She was holding long chopsticks for cooking in her hands, in the manner of a sword pose.

"All right, it's done! Here's today's boxed lunches!"

Homura placed two differently colored boxed lunches on the table.

Using a recipe book in place of a fan, she fanned the just-cooked side dishes.

"I'd really like to let it cool for a while, though," Homura mentioned.

"Well, I'll take that into account as I taste it."

"Please treat me kindly."

After bowing, Homura sat down facing Touya.

"Thanks for the meal."

Touya placed his hands together in gratitude.

"…You made them quite quickly. You took only about thirty minutes to make two boxed lunches with different contents, right?"

"Hehe. First, try this one. The theme is 'aquarium'."

The side dishes were crammed with nori seaweed and pieces of sliced dried bonito, as if they were hiding here and there at the bottom of the sea.

It was filled with sausages and mini hamburgers made to look like familiar octopuses, squids, crabs and, not tulips, but sea lilies?

"This consists of my original sea bream, flounder and—"

"…It's quite complicated."

"At least say something like 'What? This is the Dragon King Palace of boxed lunches!'."

"At most, it's a fish pond."

Dissatisfied with his reaction, Homura forcefully withdrew the half-eaten boxed lunch and pushed forward the other one.

"Then, this one is—"

"I can tell without any explanation. It's a zoo."

"How unfortunate, it's actually a safari park. Can't you feel the savanna in these chicken slices and broccoli? Feel it!"

"……"

Touya brought the lions and zebras to his mouth.

After leaning over the table with the tension of a cooking showdown manga, Homura fell back into her chair as her grandiose expression fell.

"…Is it no good?"

"No, I'm impressed. You've come up with a lot of ideas day after day."

"You really don't have any particular likes or dislikes, do you, Touya-kun?"

"It's not a matter of like or dislike here."

Touya pulled back the earlier boxed lunch and lined it up next to the other one.

"The taste is the same for both of them, regardless of how much you changed the appearance."

"Ugh."

"Well, I do think that you've progressed from the level of a fish to a monkey compared to your first attempt, you know?"

"Eh, monkey? I haven't reached the level of human yet?"

"After all, the tastiest things you've made in your trial products are rice balls. It's bad if your repertoire relies almost solely on frozen foods."

Homura joined her hands together on the table and hung her head in depression.

"Touya-san… Please give me a week. I'll make a completely new boxed lunch by then."

"Idiot. The contest is in three days. If you don't decide on your recipe today, you won't be able to buy your ingredients in time, right? Ah, hold on, your apron's slipping off."

"Eh, so after your appetite is satisfied, next you're asking for…"

"Enough with the jokes, hurry up and fix it."

"Yes, yes, the apron."

"You'd be very popular in the food sampling business," Touya grumbled while heading to the kitchen.

She stood in a boy's kitchen.

While Touya took a breather from cooking and surveyed the kitchen, Homura threw all the leftover vegetables into a bowl.

Just when she thought he was making sunny-side-up fried eggs on the heated frying pan, he immediately took it out and fried the vegetables on the pan as it was. While continuing the frying process, he tossed Chinese noodles taken from the fridge into the microwave along with the bag.

It took five or six minutes until it was finished.

"Is this… yakisoba noodles…?" Homura asked doubtfully

"Yep."

It was yakisoba stuffed into a plain aluminum container.

The hardened fried eggs were placed on top of it, causing it to give off a spicy aroma.

Homura picked up her chopsticks, looking as if she couldn't wait to dig in.

"The vegetables are dressed in Sambal sauce. It's like Indonesian mie goreng," Touya explained.

"Delicious… Mr. Detective, it's delicious. *munch, munch*"

"Who are you calling Mr. Detective?"

Homura raised her face back up while wiping her mouth with a wet tissue.

"But can this be put into a boxed lunch? Won't it grow stale by noon?"

"I used to bring it with me to the dojo a lot. It's not a problem as long as you cut off moisture."

"I see," Homura said with a nod.

"The magazines you read also mentioned pasta and noodles, right?

You don't have to bind yourself to the usual combination of cooked rice with side dishes, you know?"

"…True. Just what was I doing these past two weeks…?"

Homura's shoulders drooped.

She looked expressionlessly at the contents of the aluminum container.

"Isn't it fine if I just use this yakisoba?"

"Hey. I'm not one to say this, but that really would be, you know. It would go against the whole female power and motivation thing."

"I suppose you're right."

"The Boxed Lunch Contest isn't some three-star restaurant. The judges are going to be high school students anyway, so there's no need to fuss over it unnecessarily."

"But isn't that making light of our school's students in its own way?"

"It's better than getting let down when they eat it."

Homura turned despondent once gain.

Before she knew it, the setting sun was already shining into the room, and three-dimensional shadows fell on the apartment buildings peeking out from the window too.

"It's about time you went home. I'll accompany you to the station."

"…Yeah. Then I suppose I'll do a household search for sullen criminal suspects as exercise to help digestion."

"Just go home."

Leaving the Touya household, Homura headed towards the station while walking alongside Touya, who was pushing his bike once again.

Though they passed by a convenient store, their stomachs were already full, so they didn't bother buying something to eat.

"Spend the night thinking of ideas. We'll put a temporary hold to our running sessions until after the contest."

"Hmm, that so? Sorry about that."

Though he said that, Touya probably intended to continue the morning training himself without break. Rather, he might be able to do a harder training menu now that his time wasn't constricted by Homura.

Touya spoke up again.

"Hinooka. You've really worked hard. Normally no one would be able to do that much according to what someone else told them."

"No, that kind of thing is actually my strong point in a way—"

"I'm sorry I hounded you. You have a surprisingly composed face, so I kinda got carried away."

"W-Wait a minute…"

"It was fun."

"……"

The two of them walked silently.

Homura made a discontent expression. Walking had suddenly become terribly annoying and bothersome.

In the end, Homura had never once gotten to ride on Touya's bike. While thinking that she should bring roller skates next time to swing around, she glared at the side profile of Touya's face as it was illuminated by the setting sun.

Chapter 6 END

1 Sasaki Kojiro and Miyamoto Musashi are renowned Japanese swordsmen from the late 16th to early 17th centuries. They are most famed for their first and final duel against each other, where Musashi overcame Kojiro's legendary "Swallow Cut" technique and killed him.

a boy who can cook
for himself...

Chapter 7

The day of the Shinryoku Festival had finally arrived.

There were normally no classes on Saturday, so today was treated as a voluntary attendance day by the school. However, it was a festivity held by Seiran High, which was known for its fondness of events. Though no parents attended unlike the cultural festival, the school was still quite bustling.

The cheers and shouts of the students echoed throughout the school, reaching from the gymnasium to the music room.

And here was the home economics room.

It was the venue of the [Boxed Lunch Contest] held by the Home Economics Club. It was almost time for the food to be sampled.

Until then, only pictures posted alongside each entry were used as reference material for evaluating them.

Affixed to them were the entry numbers, titles, recipes, photos of the ingredients before cooking from various angles and even receipts from the supermarket to prove that they made the food within the designated cost of materials.

However, the rest of the information did not indicate the name of the maker or their club.

"Yo, Homuran!"

"So you came, Makichi."

Makino showed up in front of Homura as she was anxiously waiting by the window of the home economics room.

"Tahaha, I got hungry, you know? I skipped out on helping my club. The student council should permit food stands for the Shinryoku Festival."

As the jersey-wearing Makino complained, Homura bowed her head in apology.

"Sorry for not coming to visit you. I ended up preparing for this till the last minute all morning…"

"Then you managed to make it in time?"

Homura nodded again in relief, but Makino peered at her closely.

"…And yet, you don't look like you stayed up all night, Homuran… Well, in that case, good job on finishing it!"

"Yeah, thanks."

"All right, I'm going to taste the results of Homuran's home cooking training for sure~. In fact, I'll make you my wife~"

As Homura responded with a carefree laugh, Makino whispered in her ear.

"Hey, Homuran, whisper to me your entry number."

"Sorry. I was warned not to say anything since the people in charge will find out right away."

Even now, the upperclassman in charge of executing the Home Economics Club's event was glaring at her.

If votes for a specific boxed lunch were biased due to being in the same class or club, they would suspect it being a case of fixed block votes.

"So it's made completely fair… Well, I suppose that's a good thing."

Nodding with her arms crossed, Makino suddenly raised her head and surveyed their surroundings.

"…Where's Touya-kun, the enviable taste-tester?"

"He ran away. He said he couldn't stand to watch."

"How pathetic!"

"Ahaha, sorry. That was a joke. Apparently he can't come due to circumstances on his end."

Just when she thought she was getting a call from him on her cell phone for the first time, that's what he said to her.

However, it wasn't like she had called him or texted him either. She'd really prefer it if her first call to him would be to convey wonderful news.

"Hey, how are things going with the [Yamato Nadeshiko Contest]?"

"Fufufu, so you really are interested? I brought the official predictions list."

Grinning, Makino took out a folded printout from her pocket.

The page looked just like the kind of thing used for horse racing predictions, making Homura wonder where she'd gotten such information from.

"Who made that? People are really enjoying themselves with this."

The two of them unfolded the official predictions list.

"Here, look here."

From among the pictures of pretty first years, Makino pointed at a corner of the list and read it out.

"[Mysterious Transfer Student's first entry upon her first attendance! A Dark Horse for whom even her affiliated club is unknown!]"

"Entry #9, [Fujimori…Ameno]? Her last name's the same as Fujimori-sensei's…? But they don't look like sisters at all. Are they half-siblings?"

"What's this? Err, the comment she gave right before her appearance on stage was—[Serving tea is a robot's duty!]—What the heck is this? She's getting more and more mysterious."

As the two of them grew interested in the suspicious description on the printout, things became noisy over by the entrance to the home economics room.

Several tall upperclassmen had showed up.

The one who appeared at their head was a familiar face to Homura.

"Hey there, sorry for making you wait, everyone. Seiran High's Fourteenth Student Council President, Rokujizou Takara, has arrived!"

She came in trailing about ten people along with her.

"So the special judge is the student council president, huh? As usual, she's quite a noisy and boisterous person."

Makino was bewildered by the president's exaggerated entrance.

Behind Rokujizou was the accountant Yamashina who Homura had met back then, accompanying her like the manager of a busy performer.

"…Ah…"

However, the person who caught Homura's eye was a third year female student who accompanied Rokujizou.

"That's… the beauty from that time at the jazz club!"

Their eyes met.

The girl had a transparent gaze that saw through Homura.

After Homura stared at her unconsciously, the girl once again nodded in greeting at Homura in a bashful manner.

President Rokujizou also noticed Homura's presence and walked over to her.

The camera of the event's record keeper energetically made shutter noises.

"Hello, Hinooka-san. I heard you were participating in this contest. But I have to warn you that I intend to critique fairly and impartially as a special judge."

"Yes, of course. I look forward to hearing your judgment!"

While she replied in kouhai-mode, Homura couldn't help being interested in the beauty next to Rokujizou.

She repeatedly glanced at the girl.

"So, umm…"

"Her? This girl here is my friend—no, just 'friend' is incomplete as a description."

Rokujizou placed her fingers on the beauty's sloping shoulder.

"This is my best friend, Misasagi Mayo."

After being proudly introduced by Rokujizou, Misasagi-senpai shrank her shoulders and acted embarrassed once again.

Apparently, she was already a celebrity among the upperclassmen, and there seemed to be a strict practice of watching over her lovingly so as to prevent anyone from ever stepping over a fixed line.

Homura hadn't been able to clearly see her in the dark and crowded jazz club the other day, but now that she directly faced her like this, she could see that Misasagi's beauty was even more outstanding than she had imagined. She was blessed with a tall figure that rivaled President Rokujizou's, making Homura wonder why she hadn't noticed her at school until now.

Although both of them stood out in people's eyes, compared to Misasagi-senpai who gave off the aura of a high class young lady, Homura was like a worthless commoner who acted as a pretty signboard girl at a downtown shop.

"—And she's also the president of our school's prided Exploration Club."

"Misasagi-senpai, is—the president, of the Exploration—Club—?"

This person, this senpai, was the president, of the Exploration Club?

In Homura's mind, an image of Touya making a curt expression made the paltry excuse, "I didn't tell you? Sorry, sorry." Mentally, Homura squatted down and delivered a peerless, anti-aircraft uppercut aimed at the sky.

An imaginary mountain gorilla let out a war cry and fell down a ravine of skyscrapers, and the black-haired beauty that was left behind looked at Homura apologetically with closed eyes.

Naturally unperturbed by slight eccentricities of any student, Rokujizou continued the introductions.

"Today, I'm looking around the Shinryoku Festival with her while doing official business on the side—"

"You got it backwards. The official business takes precedence first and foremost."

Rokujizou ignored Yamashina's remark as he tried to keep them on track.

"Could it be that you and Misasagi are already acquainted, Hinooka-san? You're kinda giving off that feeling."

"Yes, umm, the truth is, I met her the other day in Honmachi—"

At that point, Homura's words trailed off.

I really shouldn't mention here that I went somewhere minors aren't allowed, should I? The teachers are watching, after all.

"Umm, i-in other words…"

After grasping at straws for an answer, Homura suddenly stood up straight and propped up her hands on her forehead.

"It was like, just when you thought that Nomi's space pilot did a lap around the earth, the earth was actually a cat, or something like that!"

"Hmm—I have no idea what you mean!"

Rokujizou nodded with a radiant smile, seeming happy somehow.

Next to her, Misasagi quietly joined her slender fingers together.

"In other words, the world is, a small place."

Misasagi spoke her words bit by bit, as if whispering.

Homura gasped in surprise.

"Yes… that's right! It's a really small place!"

Homura squeezed her forehead in the space between her hands.

Misasagi let slip a smile.

"We need to move along soon, president."

Yamashina spoke up again while checking the time.

"—True. It seems some people are getting hungry too. Let's hurry up and begin."

Coming back to her senses, Homura backed away unsteadily with Makino supporting her.

"…Ugh."

"Careful there. As expected, even Hinooka Homura isn't a match for the third years."

—The Exploration Club.

Then that meant that that girl was the ringleader who had nominated Homura for the Exploration Club along with Touya.

The president and Misasagi-senpai headed towards the contest venue at the center of the home economics room.

The number of contestants in the Boxed Lunch Contest was twelve.

Each of them had prepared five boxed lunches apiece.

In other words, there were sixty boxed lunches lined up here.

"Then let's begin the judging! Also, there are contestants among the people gathered here. I won't mince words, but I, Rokujizou, hold neither malice nor ulterior motives here. I'd like for all judges to speak frankly."

Homura and Makino were hidden amidst the crowd of students gathered in the home economics room.

Makino whispered in Homura's ear.

"Does the special judge have greater voting power than the others?"

"No, her vote is the same as the other students. But she has the right to eat in whatever order she wants before the others and announce her critique first."

"I see… It's actually hard to compare boxed lunches, isn't it? I'll use this as future reference."

Makino nodded in understanding.

"Depending on the case, it could turn into poison-testing, huh…"

"Ugh."

Rokujizou went to stand in front of a certain boxed lunch. The record keeper's video camera followed her.

"All right, let's start with this one. [Today's Boxed Lunch]—"

Rokujizou began her critique.

"—Among the rest of these elaborately made entries, this one's gentle on the eyes and its standard food arrangement conversely stands out. White rice with dried plums and ginger tsukidani[1]. Spinach gomae[2], thinly sliced eggs, carrot glace, and finally, beef jigureni[3] as the main dish. Hmm, assorted grains are casually used in the rice. It lacks a distinctive characteristic, but I like it. I'd even want to eat it every day.

"This one is red… the [Red Lunch]! Truly red, absolutely red! Has there been any recipe before that has a boxed lunch overflowing with such fighting spirit? The impactful and distinctive pink tint that colors the ten kinds of rice grains is plum vinegar. And these Chinese yams are also soaked in plum vinegar.

It makes my hunger well up. Furthermore, there's boiled chicken flavored with sauce along with fried olives spiced with paprika. For dessert, there are strawberries and raspberries. This one is even more impactful than last year's [Black Lunch].

"The main dish here is hot sandwiches of various colors filled with mashed potatoes—No, these are gougères! I know about it. Gougère is a choux pastry mixed with cheese and baked in an oven. At first glance, it seems long and complicated, but it's actually simple to make. The side dishes are steamed chicken piccatas and apple sauté. I seem to remember that they're cooked by using a two-tray oven. The name is a nice play on words: [Tricolor Sandwich]. It can change the rooftop or courtyard into a Montparnasse café in Paris."

—Thus continuing to speak at such a high tempo, Rokujizou critiqued the boxed lunches one after another.

Eventually reaching the end of the line-up, the president retraced her steps with a depressed gait. The audience, who had all been salivating terribly, followed after her while holding their empty stomachs.

"Now then, lastly… I suppose I'll challenge this one which I purposefully ignored… Entry #8, the [Fried Udon Boxed Lunch]!"

Rokujizou grabbed hold of a boxed lunch with a round bottom and raised it up above her head.

"—Who the hell made this boxed lunch!? As if I could eat something like this! Is this place supposed to be a beach hut!? There's an obvious problem with it even before sampling it!"

However, at that moment, Rokujizou felt an inexplicable shiver as she saw the audience's gaze forcefully torn away from her.

"…Hah… Misasagi!? What're you doing!?"

When Rokujizou followed the direction of their gaze, she saw Misasagi-senpai bring her chopsticks to the Friend Udon Boxed Lunch that the Home Economics Club members had divided up into individual plates for each dish.

"H-Hey, Misasagi! Are you trying to steal my privilege as student council president!?"

The president fell into a frantic panic.

"'You're taking, too long, *chew, chew*, to talk,' you say? Sorry about that. I was influenced by the manga I read yesterday in preparation… Eh, it tastes good?"

1 Tsukidani: small seafood, meat or seaweed that has been simmered in soy sauce and preserved.
2 Gomae: dish dressed with sesame sauce.
3 Jigureni: seafood, etc. preserve made with mirin, ginger and soy.

Misasagi gave a small nod.

Not willing to let herself fall behind, Rokujizou vigorously separated her chopsticks using her mouth.

"I-In the first place, what's with this slovenly food arrangement!? This dark drown color just like the depths of the ocean is red ginger—no, this… isn't a heap of red ginger…?"

The president looked astonished as she timidly poked her chopsticks into it.

"This is purple cabbage marinade! T-This is quite gentle on the stomach, I suppose."

She picked up some of the udon with trembling chopsticks.

"And… These pieces of dried bonito sucking up the moisture and clinging to it catch my attention, but this fragrance… this is…"

Rokujizou chewed and swallowed it.

"I-It's miso seasoning…!"

Rokujizou shuddered.

A shock ran through the audience.

"Not soy sauce or any other sauce, let alone mustard or mayonnaise—it's miso! This fried udon is seasoned with miso!"

The people listening to her critique all took a step back instinctively.

"…That's right."

Feeling a sense of oppression surrounding her, the president looked around at the audience.

"You all… Are you that absurdly weak to the taste of miso!? Since the moment we were born, the taste we were raised on from a young age, the miso malt genes we've inherited over the generations cry out, 'Give me miso! Give me miso!' Amino acids!"

Rokujizou was at her wits' end, trapped in ambivalence between intelligence and instinct.

"I won't acknowledge it. I won't acknowledge it. Fried udon is the taste you eat along with the heat of the iron plate. It's fried, therefore it's fried udon. This is just udon that's cold from the beginning!"

Amidst the dead silent room, the president once again didn't miss the quietly uttered whisper following her declaration and turned around.

"'If you say that, then even frying the rice in a bento would be tasty,' you say!? That's exactly right, Misasagi! As usual, your discernment is calm and accurate!"

Rokujizou brought more of the udon to her mouth.

"I see, using splittable chopsticks makes it easier to eat. Mumumu… the bits of fried batter with squid also smell savory! But this is junk food. To hell with nutritional balance! On the other hand, if the amount of vegetables was increased, you would lose the true texture of udon going down your throat that just barely remains here. Aah, it's no good, no good, this boxed lunch is no good!"

Giving off an inexplicable sense of defeat, Rokujizou supported herself with her hands on the nearby desk.

"……"

"Is that all?" asked Yamashina.

"Yeah."

Quickly regaining her gallantry, Rokujizou surveyed everyone in the room.

"With this, my critique is finished. Sorry for making you all wait. Please go on and sample the food, everyone. I wish every boxed lunch-chan luck."

The student council president threw a piece of paper into the ballot box that the Home Economics Club members had respectfully brought out.

"I will merely cast my vote on what I believe in," she said as a parting remark, and then headed off to the next venue. Misasagi-senpai also cast in her own vote and gave a bow to the remaining students before leaving.

The results of the [Boxed Lunch Contest] tallied that day—

Hinooka Homura's [Fried Udon Boxed Lunch] earned great popularity and acquired first place alongside the Home Economic Club members' entry [Medley Sushi Boxed Lunch]. The grand prize was a gift certificate for books. The extra prize was the right to use the demonically-remodeled electric bicycle that served as student council equipment.

On the other hand, in the annually uproarious [Yamato Nadeshiko Contest]—

The female secretary sent in by the student council achieved victory and recovered the title for the student council after their loss last year.

The conspicuous dark horse Fujimori Ameno, after performing the tea-making perfectly, unveiled a school swimsuit with a bewitching way of undressing that you wouldn't expect from a first year and vigorously jumped into the pool, but when she showed no signs of surfacing after several minutes, Professor Fujimori rushed in and saved her, and while the audience was left dumbfounded, Fujimori dragged her off somewhere… Hah.

Chapter 7 END

Chapter 8

After school.

Just as instructed, Homura went to wait in front of the door to the staff room right after Modern Japanese class ended, and soon afterwards, Professor Fujimori appeared in front of her.

Instead of her usual jeans, Fujimori was wearing a suit.

The tight skirt she wore suited her well, making her look like a skilled teacher.

"Sensei… are you going out job hunting?"

Fujimori's face twitched at Homura's joking comment.

"Go ahead and laugh if you want."

"No, no, you look wonderful. It looks cute on you. I really admire you."

"I'm begging you, please just laugh already."

"If you always taught lessons looking like that, I wouldn't doze off in class."

"You… And after I overlooked your actions so many times…"

As Homura tried to head off towards the school gates, Fujimori stopped her while wincing in pain at having to wear pumps. Normally she wore boots.

"We're heading to the parking lot."

"Ah, we're taking your car? Based on your image, you seem like you'd have a jet-black, leather-covered Harley-Davidson. Like, you'd hold a shotgun in one hand and shoot with a bang as you do a rapid turn!"

"No such execution teacher exists."

The two of them arrived at the parking lot. The car they got into was a Mini-Cooper.

Fujimori took out a pair of driving glasses from the glove compartment and put them on, her image doing a job change from a skilled teacher to a secretary.

While putting on her seatbelt in the passenger seat, Homura spoke up.

"I didn't think you would come help persuade my parents, sensei."

"We made a promise, after all. You got the proper results, though it was a boxed lunch whose taste practically broke the rules…"

Homura noisily protested against the unnecessary comment Fujimori added at the end.

Smiling, Fujimori turned on the Mini-Cooper and drove off.

Their destination was the Hinooka household.

"This time, it's my turn to act."

Earlier that day, Fujimori had called the house and asked when would be a convenient day for her to visit, and Homura's mother had readily agreed to do it today. After getting a call about it from her, Homura's father had hurried his return home and was in the midst of driving home while fretting.

As they passed by the sports club members who were running around the school, Fujimori asked Homura a question.

"Are you continuing your morning training?"

"Somehow. Lately, the training menu has been getting more flexible."

“Touya really is good at looking after others.”

“No, I was completely fooled by him. My pride has been shredded to pieces!”

“What are you going on about?”

“If he’s been watching a great beauty like Misasagi-senpai from close up every day, then of course his usual feelings towards girls would be numbed! Right!?”

“I get it. Before you start the Exploration Club’s training, I’m going to beat you into shape starting from that over-self-consciousness of yours.”

“Hah!? That’s too cruel!”

The Mini-Cooper got on the main road and accelerated.

Having leaned her body forward as she protested, Homura had her head slammed against her seat with a bang.

As they drove, Western music from FM Radio played through the car.

After looking curiously at the car’s manual shift which she had rarely seen, Homura now wore a meek expression as she asked a new question.

“—Sensei.”

“Hmm?”

“About Touya-kun’s sister…”

“Yeah, it’s true. She’s dead.”

Having guessed Homura’s question, Fujimori immediately answered.

“How about you ask him about it yourself? He’d probably tell you without paying it any mind.”

“No, that’s a bit…”

To Homura, Fujimori was about the only person she could ask about the circumstances.

“Was it from… an illness?”

“……It happened… about nine years ago.”

Fujimori turned down the volume of the radio.

“Do you remember the Oosumi Incident?”

“Ah…”

Homura frowned as she felt anxiety rise back up within her.

“I remember the gist of it.”

Fujimori silently nodded.

Even if she had no concrete memories of it, the heavy feelings associated with it still lurked within Homura’s chest. It was an accident that had carved great fear into local children and parents.

Even Homura, who hadn’t been well-informed about it, was no different.

“He was a first year elementary school student at the time. His sister was a sixth year student at the same school as him.”

One year after the photo of the two of them in Touya’s room was taken—

“The culprit, who lived nearby, invaded the school. It seems his sister was killed right in front of his eyes.”

“……”

"The culprit was arrested on site. Two children died. A teacher was also gravely injured."

Touya's older sister was one of the victims from the incident.

She might have tried to protect the young Touya with her small body…

When she thought that, Homura's eyes heated up and she hung her head as the light of the setting sun through the window suddenly felt too bright.

"…What happened to the culprit after he was caught?"

"He was diagnosed as being of unsound mind and wasn't prosecuted. Apparently he acted out of a grudge towards his parents and the middle school that was the cause of him being a shut-in."

"Isn't that completely unrelated to those elementary school children?"

"Yeah. It's completely unrelated. That's why it was so painful."

"……"

Homura had no words to say.

"Touya apparently started kendo after that incident. He probably thought about it while he was a kid."

Suddenly, Fujimori sighed as she loosened her shoulders.

"…And that's everything that I heard from his father."

"What, so you didn't ask him directly either then, sensei."

"No, hahaha."

Hearing about losing one's family made Homura remember that woman whose child had been abducted. For how many years had her sorrow continued without healing or having a clear target to aim her anger at?

Whether she had a target to be angry at or not, it was probably painful either way. But was the sorrow of parting without a clear end lighter than the pain of a certain death?

Unable to choose her words well, Homura asked Fujimori that vague question.

"—Anger without an outlet, huh? It's difficult to compare the depth of different people's sorrow."

"I suppose so…"

"It differs for every person. There are people who get so depressed that it harms their health when their pet goldfish dies, and there are also those who don't shed a single tear even when their own child dies."

"……"

Causes of death were not limited to just accidents or crimes, but included illness and even old age. But even if that was common sense, people couldn't easily agree with it.

"But, what is clear is—we have no choice but to move forward."

"That's true. We have to work hard as the people left behind," Homura strongly agreed as she clenched her fist slightly.

Hearing Homura say that, Fujimori raised an eyebrow and looked at her with a sharp gaze.

"Were you left behind?"

"…Eh?"

"No, I'm sorry for asking something so insensitive, but… you're saying the dead left for the [other side]?"

"That… might not be quite right, but they… did go somewhere we don't know."

"I see. Putting it that way, dying might not be all that bad."

Of course, it was clear that Fujimori did not actually think that way.

Fujimori gripped the steering wheel while looking far off into the scenery through the front window, looking like a sailor gripping the wheel at a ship's helm to Homura.

"Somewhere we don't know, huh? That stretches out before the eyes of those of us who live in the now. All the way out to infinity."

"…Those are the words of Vasco da Gama, right?"

"…No."

"Then Admiral Perry, who compelled Japan to open its borders?"

"Wrong. They're the words of Fujimori Chiayu, yours truly. You're really fussy, you know?"

Fujimori waved her left hand angrily to hide her embarrassment.

"Chiayu? Chiayu-chan? That's your first name, sensei?"

Homura smirked at the cute ring of it.

"What, that's much cuter than a nickname like Mori-chan! I'll have to tell Touya-kun later."

"If you call me Chiayu-chan, I'll smack you."

Having dug her own hole again, Fujimori slumped and rested her head against the steering wheel.

"Ah, that's right, there's one thing I'd like to ask."

"What, another question? Damn it, your house is far!"

"This is the last one, really. Umm, it's about Fujimori Ameno…-san?"

"So you finally brought that up."

Fujimori glared ahead with stern eyes.

"Could you tell me about her already? People have been gossiping about her ever since the Shinryoku Festival."

Homura herself had mostly heard about it from her classmates, but apparently the mysterious beautiful girl who was disqualified from the [Yamato Nadeshiko Contest] hadn't appeared at school ever since, remaining unidentified.

Fujimori, who seemed to be the only one who knew the circumstances around her, had been running around avoiding being asked about it by the students as well.

Now that Homura was hounding her inside the car with no escape available, Fujimori finally spoke frankly about it while heaving a long, resigned sigh.

"Ameno is a freeloader staying at my place. As a result, I've temporarily registered her as part of my family."

"I-I-Is she your illegitimate child!?"

"Hah, I thought you'd say that. No, she's not. And she isn't a sister born from a different mother either! Don't spread weird rumors."

"But would you really register a complete stranger as part of your family? Rather, is that something you can just rent out temporarily in the first place? Is she a member of the Exploration Club?"

"What makes you think that?"

"Touya-kun seemed to know about her too."

"You've really come to understand that that boy can't hide anything."

"And besides, a certain person said that there were 'three' club members before."

She didn't reveal that Rokujizou was the one who had said it. Back then, Homura had simply felt that there was something that shouldn't be touched upon in her gaze. Now though, Homura's curiosity won over.

"……"

Fujimori wore a complicated expression as she fell silent.

"I'd like to meet Ame-chan, though."

"Ame-chan?"

"She seems interesting."

"She's a huge bother for me, as the one forced to be her guardian, though… Ah, unfortunately, she's not a formal member. She's still a provisional club member, and right now she's in main… convalescence. You'll get the chance to meet her eventually."

"When—"

Fujimori silently glared at Homura, implicitly saying, "Don't ask any further."

After driving through a residential area, the car arrived at Homura's house.

Her father's car wasn't in the house's garage yet.

He would probably arrive here shortly.

"Come on, general. The stronghold is virtually empty."

"All right, let's march in."

Fujimori took out from the back seat a cake she had bought as a present on the way here.

"If you're going to prostrate for permission, shouldn't you do it Japanese style?"

"I'm not going to prostrate. I didn't come here to take you as my wife."

Homura's mother came out from the front door.

Fujimori corrected her posture and greeted her courteously, every bit the ideal teacher.

…Well, in terms of appearance, at least.

With this, there was hope of making her father, who had been persistently objecting to Homura joining the club, capitulate. With the guidance of her mother sitting beside him, their success was even more certain.

Turning to face her younger sister, who was looking down from the second-story veranda to see what was going on, Homura was already showing a victory sign to her.

Chapter 8 END

Chapter 9

"Are you nervous?"

"J-Just a little."

Touya fretted over Homura as they headed for the Exploration Club room.

"Do you want to go to the toilet first?"

"I'll go later. Or rather, a building that big has to have a toilet of its own inside!"

"Well, it does, but…"

The source of her anxiety didn't lie in the fortress-like building that didn't suit the school grounds it was on, and towards which they were heading.

"Oh, senpai."

The source of Homura's nervousness was waiting in front of the building.

"Welcome, back."

Misasagi-senpai waited in the hallway before the club building.

When she saw Homura and Touya, she waved her hand a little.

"Good morning, senpai!"

"Good, morning, Touya-kun. And, Hinooka-san, too. Welcome to the, Exploration Club room[1]."

"I look forward to working with you from now on, Misasagi-senpai."

Homura placed her hands on her knees and bowed deeply.

"Yes, I look forward, to working with, you too."

Senpai's beautiful hair drifted forward a little as she nodded in greeting.

With senpai leading them, they went to stand inside the entrance floor that led into the club building.

The cypress signboard above the door seemed mismatched with the words [Exploration Club] written on it in huge letters.

Senpai placed her hand on the stand that protruded out of the floor, in front of the glass door. There was a palm mark on the stand. It was a vein scanner, something that Homura had only ever seen in movies before.

"……"

But it didn't react at all.

Senpai tilted her head in confusion.

"Senpai, your terminal."

"Ah."

After Touya whispered that to her, senpai took out her terminal with the letters UNPIEP inscribed on it and held it over the stand's sensor before once more placing her palm on it.

An electronic beep rang out, indicating the completion of authentication.

"Three people, entering."

After senpai said that into a mike next to the door, a small camera lens embedded in the wall flashed for an instant. The light seemed to have scanned her.

A message indicating permission to enter directly appeared on the reinforced glass door, which then slid open.

While feeling impressed, Homura took a step into the club building.

"It all seems too strict."

"I know, right? I still can't enter on my own yet either."

"It measures, your body weight, too."

"Wha-!?"

After senpai told her that, Homura jumped in fright on the floor mat.

"The weight of the club members is monitored as well!?"

"We can't have anyone bringing in anything that could be a nuisance, after all."

"I-I see… You can't be too careful, I guess."

There was an elevator right after the entrance, upon which there was a simple sketch of the building's layout.

"Training room… Stand-by Night Duty room… Network Terminal Room… Back Storage…"

There was a list of rooms whose names she had never heard of.

The first floor was apparently occupied by a single large room, while facilities related to everyday living were concentrated on the second floor. There was an astronomical observation dome on the roof. The basement seemed to be a storehouse.

"Ah, like I thought, there really is a fully-equipped kitchen here."

"We'll show you, around the rooms, later. For now, we're going to, the second floor."

Guided by sempai, they got on the elevator and went up to the standby room on the second floor.

This room was the closest to the image of a club room in Homura's mind, making her feel slightly relieved.

A standard table surrounded by pipe chairs, a small TV and a multimedia player.

There were also a tea pot and personal belongings that had been left lying around.

The part that Homura was the most grateful for was the room's window, which faced the mountain behind the school. It would have been perfect if it faced the school grounds, but that seemed unlikely in this strangely thick-walled building.

"Welcome."

Sitting in a chair with her legs crossed, Fujimori greeted Homura and the others as they entered.

"Well done getting into the Exploration Club, Hinooka Homura, though you went through a bit of a detour to get here…"

Fujimori stood and placed one hand energetically on the table.

"This is your starting point."

A map was laid out on the table.

Fujimori tapped a pen against it with a thump.

"First, let's finish up the ceremony. Here, Misasagi."

Fujimori handed a packaged, brand-new portable terminal, several documents and a card to Misasagi.

Misasagi was taken aback.

"Is it all right, for me to, do it?"

"Of course. You're the club president here."

Going over to stand in the middle of the room, Misasagi-senpai and Homura solemnly faced each other.

Even the way senpai cleared her throat was cute and lovely.

"Then, Seiran High Class 1-A, Student ID Number ***, Hinooka Murya… Homura-san."

"Yes."

Senpai had fumbled on her name.

"—From today onwards, you are appointed the title of Beginner rank investigator, within the Exploration Club under the Japanese branch of the UNPIEP. Approved by UN Secretary-General *** ***, Imaginary Earth Investigation Director and Exploration Club Advisor Fujimori Chiayu, and Senior Investigator and Exploration Club President Misasagi Mayo."

"Congratulations."

"Thank you very much."

Fujimori and Touya clapped as Homura received the investigator license.

It was a small club with three members and a single advisor.

When Homura sat down beside Touya, Misasagi belatedly brought her a plain paper carton that she took out from the refrigerator.

"This is… to celebrate Hinooka-san's, entry into the club, meager as it may, be."

"Oh, Misasagi's apple pie. It's been a while since you last made it," said Fujimori.

"Yes."

"Wow, thank you so much. It looks delicious!"

"It's a recipe I'm proud, of."

"Yet, I don't remember you making any when I joined…"

After Touya murmured that in shock, Misasagi became flustered.

"Sorry… Back then, I had just, been made president, and was still getting, used to it…"

"It's all right, senpai. I'll eat two meals worth of it today."

"Yes, please eat, lots."

Touya gave her a broad smile, causing Misasagi-senpai to pat her chest in relief.

"But, yesterday evening, I turned on my, home's oven for the, first time in a while…"

Misasagi hung her head midway through her words and fell silent.

Fujimori stood up frantically.

"D-Don't cry, Misasagi! Today's supposed to be a happy day!"

Fujimori patted the shoulder of the dejected senpai.

"All right, Touya! Bring out the plates and knives! Hmm, does black tea go well with pie?"

"Roger that, sensei. I'll bring the plates!"

"I'll drink tea."

"Make it yourself, Hinooka."

The Exploration Club members ate the apple pie with relish at the table.

The room next door was apparently a break room.

"It's my first time coming here, but this club building really is amazing. How much money does it all cost?"

"You know, you might be the first person to be interested in that kind of detail. If I remember right, the main building costs about five billion yen."

"Five billion!?"

"What? It's pretty cheap compared to something like an aircraft carrier or stealth fighter."

"Isn't comparing it to an aircraft carrier a bit of an exaggeration?" Touya pointed out.

"No, in a certain sense, this place is our country's aircraft carrier."

Misasagi also nodded in agreement.

"Well, it's my job as the club's advisor to carefully consider such minor matters so that you guys don't have to worry about it."

"Please do. By the way, if the club has such a huge budget, does that mean the club members also get wages?"

"Of course not. The Exploration Club is basically a group of volunteers."

"Eh~? Well, I already knew that, I guess. Still, if I make some kind of huge discovery as part of the Exploration Club, I won't get a monetary bonus, then?"

"How greedy," Touya sighed.

"If you discover something amazing, I'll take you to a hot spring or anywhere else you want!" declared their advisor while puffing up proudly.

"Fuooo, a hot spring? Actually, isn't there already a hot spring in the training area…?" Homura asked.

"As a matter of fact—"

"Oh my, can I have another cup of tea, Misasagi?"

The club advisor forcefully interrupted Misasagi-senpai's words before she could say anything.

By the looks of it, this hot spring idea was something she'd done before in the past.

The two new club members made eye contact and mentally recorded to themselves: 'Fujimori-sensei requires special attention when she hangs bait in front of our noses.'

"Senpai—no, president, you said that I'm a Beginner rank investigator, but what rank are you?"

"I'm a, 3rd rank, investigator."

"Hoho, 3rd rank… how unexpectedly… low?"

"Hey," Touya said with a glare.

"Sorry, that was rude of me. Umm, if I remember right, you said you were a 5th rank investigator, right?"

"That's right. It's the next rank up from Beginner rank."

"Then that means… Beginner rank investigator is equivalent to 6th rank, huh? Hah, I have a long road ahead of me."

Fujimori cut in after picking up a bisected piece of pie with a fork and swallowing it all in two mouthfuls.

"I'll tell you guys this now, but rank is meaningless when on an expedition. It's simply a title decided by the nation."

"Right."

Misasagi nodded in agreement with the chiding Fujimori.

"Then it isn't like how belt ranks are assigned in kendo? If what matters isn't one's level as an investigator, then what does? Something like experience, trust, or safety first…?"

"Uwah," Fujimori exclaimed as she bent back in her chair. "So weak. Why is it that those words sound so weak and shallow when they come out of Hinooka's mouth?"

"Sorry for being shallow…"

"Ranks only designate the qualifications you possess. Look, it's like how there are the Hundred Top Mountains of Japan, but there are mountaineers who have climbed all of them once and mountaineers who have only climbed Mt. Fuji a hundred times. Can you say that either one of them is better than the other?"

"When you put it like that, it does seem like a tricky difference…"

Homura crossed her arms with a meek expression.

"But wouldn't climbing Everest a hundred times surpass everything else…?"

"You really like getting the last word, don't you?" Touya remarked, so amazed that, at this point, he could only admire her.

"Sorry…"

Homura drooped her head with reproachful eyes.

But then, Homura was given words of encouragement.

"…Curiosity is…"

When she lifted her head, Homura found herself meeting the eyes of Misasagi-senpai, who had leaned forward unexpectedly close to her.

"Curiosity is, something everyone, is born with…"

Without minding that her hair was brushing against the pie on her plate, Misasagi spoke enthusiastically.

Fujimori also calmly gazed at her face from the side.

"Exploration, requires… a persistent, fighting spirit… so as to never, forget that…"

"…Fighting spirit?"

"Yes," Misasagi said with a nod. "A heart that, never falters."

Misasagi-senpai exuded an aura that was far removed from fighting spirit.

But it was precisely because she was like that that those words remained in Homura's chest.

Just as he had declared, Touya ate two of the six slices of pie.

Just when Homura reached out to grab the one remaining slice left, Fujimori made a declaration in a formal tone.

"Now then."

As Homura twitched with a start, Fujimori got up from her chair while looking at the clock.

“Let’s end the welcome party around here. Have you finished your preparations, everyone?”

“—Eh?”

“—Heh?”

It wasn’t only Homura who stiffened at Fujimori’s words, but Touya as well.

Only Misasagi-senpai remained calm.

“You couldn’t mean… preparations for an expedition? Right now?”

“That’s right. Ah, I’ll take care of cleaning up here, Misasagi.”

Misasagi nodded nonchalantly.

“Even though it’s almost evening? Even though we have lessons tomorrow?”

“Yeah—I guess we should send a message to our homes first. Hey, Hinooka, give up on the last slice.”

After pushing Homura towards the stairs with a forceful “Move, move!”, Touya turned around with a dubious smile.

“You’re joking, right? Right, sensei!?”

“Do these shoe soles look like they’re joking?”

“Hinooka hasn’t made any preparations yet, you know?”

“You built up her stamina with running. You have my thanks for that, Touya.”

“But not even a month has gone by yet since we started. Ow, don’t kick me, Mori-chan.”

The first floor of the club building.

When she entered the female changing room with Misasagi, Homura was filled with surprise.

Inside, female uniforms of every size were prepared in systematic order.

Homura became wide-eyed as she looked at the uniform Misasagi-senpai had picked out for her while estimating her size.

The outfit consisted of a winter blazer over a long-sleeved shirt with other accessories. Somehow, its silhouette seemed to be subtly different from the regular one?

“We’re changing into winter uniforms?”

“Because it’s cold, at night.”

“So it’s already been decided that we’re staying the night there.”

Next, Misasagi pointed out the tray furnished in each locker box.

“If you have, a cellphone, watch, or any kind of, media device, please put them, in here. Every last, electronic device, you have. They’ll break if, you bring them to, the Imaginary Earth.”

“So, all means of communication are confiscated too!”

Though bewildered, Homura accepted the clothes, and Misasagi-senpai also began changing as if to serve as an example for her to follow. What instantaneous decision-making and quickness in changing!

Homura’s confusion that made her instinctively complain about the lack of time to prepare her heart was blown away by the gallantness in Misasagi’s movements and actions.

The out-of-place sensation she felt over the uniform became more certain once she actually put her sleeves through the clothes.

Homura stood in front of the mirror on the wall.

The appearance was similar to their school uniform, but the quality of the cloth and the arrangement of the clothes' gussets were completely different. Strange-feeling pads were added around the elbows and shoulders to soften impacts.

The torso section was lined with broad and sturdy belts, and attached around them were metal fixtures for hanging tools. Trapezoid metal rings were hanging like highlights from her waist with one on each side. They didn't budge no matter how hard she pulled. Furthermore, garter belt-like straps were attached to her legs, linking with her torso belts.

Later, she learned that the belts fixed to her body were harnesses and the trapezoid metal rings were pieces of climbing gear known as snap rings.

After Homura somehow managed to finished changing properly, Misasagi carefully inspected her.

While hopping up and down in order to test the condition of her specially-made shoes, Homura spoke up.

"…Senpai, did you know Fujimori-sensei had this surprise in store?"

"I didn't, plan this, with her."

Senpai smiled while shrugging her shoulder apologetically.

"But, I had a, feeling about, it."

"So it's like that…"

Finally, Homura finished all her preparations.

"H-Heavy…"

"It's made of, knife-proof fiber, so the weight, can't be helped."

If so much effort was put into to making it sturdy and practical, why the fixation with making it look like the school uniform?Homura didn't get it at all.

As Homura remained unconvinced on that part, Misasagi placed a hand on her shoulder and directed her to face the mirror.

"Look carefully, at yourself, and burn it into, your mind. It's, important."

"Yes."

Homura's face in the mirror was uneasy.

"I've really come to a remarkable place… Hey, now that I look properly, isn't your outfit even bolder, senpai…?"

"Is, it?"

Misasagi-senpai looked over her uniform again. It was even more customized than Homura's, with an easy-to-move-in design.

There was a knock on the changing room's door, and Fujimori poked her head in.

"How's it going, Girls' Team?"

Fujimori looked over Homura with a grin.

"Hoh, it suits you. You don't look like a novice investigator at all."

"Thanks… Are you not coming with us on the expedition, sensei? As our director, I mean."

"Hahaha, of course not. I'm the club's advisor. In the first place, the expedition would be boring if you were always under the watch of the director, right?"

Homura gazed at Fujimori reproachfully.

"That's different from what it says in the contract of employment… It said, 'We won't allow anything dangerous to happen and we'll supervise everything'…"

"Haha. So you eavesdropped on the conversation between adults?"

"Of course I did, it's a matter concerning myself, after all!"

Fujimori pushed the yelling Homura from behind and led her out of the female changing room. Misasagi-senpai also followed after them.

"That was a complete lie. No, lies are bad. It was a joke."

"So underhanded! What an underhanded adult!"

"It's a trivial matter before the issue of gaining more club members."

"You all were against me joining at first! You especially, sensei!"

"That was just me being tsundere. It's a personal skill that was popular in my student days."

Homura felt uneasy about the direction she was forcefully being led towards.

"Are we going outside—to the parking lot?"

"No, we're not. Though it can't be helped that you might think that."

They were headed towards the Sterilization and Decompression Room in the center of the club building.

As they entered through the airlock, they were covered with lighting and mist for dealing with bacteria.

Touya was already waiting for them in the huge room with a high ceiling, where the lights were dimmed.

Once they were all gathered together, Fujimori spoke before the three of them.

"This room is, on paper, the Sterilization and Decompression Room. However, we club members don't call it that. We refer to it as the [Transport Room]."

"You said I would pile up basic training and ready myself to be in a perfect state before starting…" Homura once again grumbled in the midst of Fujimori's speech.

"Let me be frank, Hinooka. I really hate that kind of small-mindedness. If you try and fail, think of another method. Experience rather than study. It will be all right in the end. If I angered you, I apologize. Okay? Now let's go."

"You say that like it's someone else's business."

"Mori-chan's bad habit came out again…"

"So you get it? Then I'll explain the mission this time. There's no particular changes from the plan I discussed with Misasagi before—"

Misasagi nodded.

The details of the mission were then explained along with a three-dimensional map image projected on the wall.

However, Homura was completely left behind as none of the explanation entered her head, so she just absentmindedly looked around the room.

On one section of the wall, the latitude and longitude showing the location of Seiran High was displayed along with the current time.

Right beneath that were the coordinates of the Imaginary Earth along with the current time there, but the numbers were clearly abnormal.

The two indicated times were clearly out of sync.

"This time, Hinooka will carry only the minimum required equipment. Touya will carry the rest."

"Understood—but I'm still against this."

Homura came back to her senses at Touya's words.

The normally serious and honest Touya had a slight amount of anger mixed into his voice.

"This is too sudden. She should at least learn how to do a long walk and how to read a map—"

"And what next? River crossing techniques? How to make a shelter? Securing drinking water? Every one of those skills is essential. Hinooka will have already graduated by the time she masters everything."

Touya lost ground to his argument as Fujimori-sensei talked on without pause.

"Kuh… But she doesn't even have any experience with outdoor activities. It might still be acceptable if she was a boy, but she's a girl."

"That's why Misasagi is with you. And besides, Touya, this is your third time visiting the Imaginary Earth too. There should be tons of things you can teach her there."

"That should only be after Hinooka has hardened her resolve! Can't we do this mission with just two of us?"

"That's why I'm having her go with you."

Misasagi-senpai followed the heated argument between the two of them. However, Homura herself found them to be unusually serious, like it was someone else's problem to her.

In order to disperse the rising tension, she tried cracking a joke.

"This is just like the Hollywood-remake New Year special of the 47 Ronin[2] story with a happy ending, don't you think?"

"…What?"

As Fujimori was stumped by confusion, Misasagi-senpai interjected.

"All's well, that ends well, she means."

Misasagi-senpai smiled. She seemed to be just a bit relieved.

On the other hand, Touya wore a stunned expression.

"—You seem quite composed, somehow."

"Eh, that's not true at all, you know? I'm just barely hanging on here, see?"

"Ah, please continue, sensei."

"Hey, don't abandon me."

Grinning, Fujimori placed her hand on the wall. She went through the same authentication procedure as when they entered the building, and then a thin tray slid out from within the wall.

Placed inside it on top of velvet fabric with lining resembling a jewel was a literal treasure.

It was a single ring, which gave off a faint light within the dim room. If Homura's eyes weren't playing tricks on her, that is.

Fujimori picked up the ring from the tray.

"This is a [Transport Ring][3]."

"…Transport Ring…"

"The exaggerated equipment in this room, on this entire floor, is merely an arbor prepared for the sake of this single small ring here. In my days, there was no such thing as a transport room, and this was just an ordinary part of the school campus."

Fujimori gazed at the faces of the club members one by one through the ring's finger hole.

"The value of what's hidden in this ring is literally infinite to humanity."

She held out the palm which carried the ring, and then turned to Misasagi.

"—Are your preparations complete, club president?"

Nodding with a humble expression, Misasagi-senpai took the proffered ring and put it on her finger.

A soft, rainbow-colored glow appeared around her finger.

Carrying their equipment on his back, Touya gave Homura a push on the back and urged her towards the center of the room.

"All right, let's head out."

"By transport, you mean that kind of thing… Are you sure this isn't a game?"

"Like I said, it's not. To us, this is a reality whose destination we have no idea of."

"……"

As Homura hesitated, Misasagi-senpai gently gripped her right hand.

She felt the chilling touch of Misasagi's ring.

Following that, Misasagi-senpai held out her hand to Touya as well, thereby holding hands with both of the other club members on either side.

Touya, with a slightly stiff expression, but smiling regardless, held out his other hand to Homura.

"……"

Thus, Homura laced her fingers together with Touya's, and the three of them faced one another in a small circle.

1 Misasagi has the tendency to speak haltingly and quietly, demonstrated in the text by the over-usage of commas in her sentences.

2 Refers to the American movie "47 Ronin" which came out in 2013, based on a popular Japanese tale of a real-life group of samurai who sought to avenge their fallen lord.

3 In the original, the furigana above the kanji for "Transport Ring" only says "Ring", but for the sake of English readers I will translate it fully as "Transport Ring" here.

After exchanging a glance with Fujimori, Misasagi-senpai read out the display on the wall.

"Japanese time, Month ***, Day ***, Hour ***, Minutes ***. Imaginary Earth time, Day ***, Hour ***, Minutes ***. Predicted weather, clear skies, with a reliability of 25%—

Seiran High Exploration Club, departing to the Imaginary Earth."

Fujimori stood some distance from the three of them.

"Now, go and enjoy yourselves! It's fine even if you lose an arm or two. Just come back safely."

"I'm going to die!"

Not permitting Homura's final wavering, power gathered in Misasagi-senpai's finger.

Light flashed and flickered behind Homura's eyelids.

She shuddered at the out-of-place feeling that ran up through her from her feet.

She became so sensitive that every individual hair on her body could feel the weight of her clothes' fabric.

So much that she could hear the *grains* of her skin grate against one another.

The smooth creaking of tense muscles against tendons, bone against bone.

The hum that engulfed her entire body was the sound of her blood's violent torrent.

She could count every last drop of blood that was sucked into the black hole of her heart and then pushed back out with overwhelming power and sent rushing through her body once more.

By the time she realized it, Homura was looking at Homura. It was the reflection of herself displayed in Touya's eyes which stared right at her. When she turned her eyes to the right, she saw Misasagi-senpai there, sweating and with her eyes closed.

In that instant, she became one with Misasagi-senpai.

Senpai's hot, hot palm. Touya's hot, hot breath. My chilled, frozen heart.

In the midst of a dark, dark abyss spanning light-years, flames—

Chapter 9 END

food sample.

Chapter 10

"Touya-kun, some light please[1]—"

Misasagi-senpai's voice rang out.

When Homura suddenly regained consciousness, she found that she was no longer holding the hands of the other two and had fallen to her knees on a rough floor made of rock without realizing it.

Her surroundings were pitch-black. They appeared to be in a sealed room where not even a draft of wind could be felt.

She could still feel the sensation of Misasagi-senpai's hand which had been placed on her back until just now, making her feel strangely unafraid.

"Yes…"

Touya replied from somewhere close by, followed by the sound of very low muttering.

Misasagi-senpai held her breath and waited. Right, she had said something about light—

"……Sorry, senpai."

Touya apologized in a feeble voice, and Misasagi-senpai immediately picked up where he'd left off muttering.

"Hi (Hydrogen)… Ox (Oxygen)… Sr (Sulfur)…"

Blue sparks scattered through the air, and a light appeared at senpai's fingertip.

As the flickering of the light contracted, its intensity increased, until it became as bright as the screen of a cell phone.

Homura and the others were in a small room with a lower ceiling than that of the Transport Room.

It looked like a stone cellar with no windows. Wooden boxes and barrels were systemically piled up along the walls, while empty space was secured in the center of the room. Though there was a slight mouldy smell, it wasn't strong enough to make Homura scrunch her nose. The air was also quite dry.

After standing up, Homura questioned Misasagi-senpai while coughing.

"…Did we get transported? Have we arrived?"

"Yes. We're already on the Imaginary Earth, Nutella."

When she turned to look at senpai, Homura was startled. For an instant, she thought a complete stranger was standing there. Even when she immediately convinced herself that it was a trick of the light, her throbbing heart wouldn't settle down.

"Touya-kun, can you stand?"

"…Yeah, somehow…"

The gentle voice definitely belonged to senpai, but—

Once her eyes got used to the dim lighting, Homura caught sight of Touya and walked over to him.

"Touya-kun, are you all right?"

Touya nodded with faked vigor as senpai looked after him.

"I'm just suffering from transport sickness. I'll be better after I rest a bit. Are you okay, Hinooka-san?"

"Yes, I seem to be fine already."

Watching Touya queasily squat on the ground, Homura helped take off the bag on his back and lent her shoulder to help him stand.

"…Sorry."

"There we go… It's fine!"

Misasagi-senpai stood up first and led them towards the stone steps leading above.

"You're not shocked at all, huh?" said senpai to Homura over her shoulder.

She carefully pushed open the room's wooden door and began climbing the stairs.

The floor above was also wrapped in darkness but some faint light seeped in from the gaps along the room's window panes, illuminating the dust in the air.

Misasagi-senpai extinguished the light at her fingertip and went to help support Touya together with Homura.

They sat Touya down on a wooden chair alongside a table within the room.

"Please keep an eye on Touya-kun for a bit."

"Ah, sure."

Misasagi-senpai swiftly went around the windows and adjoining rooms and confirmed the state of things outside through peepholes.

"Fufu, did I manage to make you indebted to me, Touya-kun?"

"……If you're going to bring that up, at least call it doing me a favor."

Senpai returned without incident.

"It's all right. It's safe. Let's get some fresh air in here. Hinooka-san, please take care of the front door—"

"Sure. I just need to release the latch, right?"

Where had her previous anxiousness gone?

Homura went over to the front door in high spirits.

The door latch was just like the kind she imagined seeing in a historical drama, so Homura was able to immediately figure out how to open it.

The latch was completely covered in dust, even though Misasagi-senpai and Touya's last visit to Nutella should only have been three weeks ago.

"*Cough, cough*"

While coughing again, Homura pushed open the front door.

A refreshing wind blew in, carrying sunlight and the smell of trees.

After taking a few steps outside while squinting at the sudden brightness, Homura was then overwhelmed by the sight that spread out before her.

"……"

It was a stone castle standing on a mountain slope.

They were using a restored section of a collapsed and abandoned castle.

The room that Homura was in, which she had thought to be the first floor's entranceway, was in fact a terrace that slightly jutted out from the mountain.

A slope to come and go from the castle jutted out from either side of the terrace, extending down to the base of the mountain and further on to a sea of trees that stretched far off to the horizon.

Before her eyes was an unbroken view of an open and spacious valley. A river meandering through the valley looked as if it were flowing gently downward from her perspective.

The horizon felt as if it was much, much higher and farther away than she estimated, even creating the illusion that she was standing pitched forward, on the verge of falling. The glitter of what she thought were clouds stretching off into the distance was in fact the ridgelines of many snowy mountains towering next to one another. The sight continued on as far as Homura's vision could see.

Homura gazed at this striking natural silver curtain while gripping the terrace's handrail.

"Hey, don't go out on your own…"

Touya also came out onto the terrace while shaking his head.

With her eyes wide open, Homura turned around in a daze.

"……This is amazing."

"Yeah."

Grinning, Touya pointed at the sky.

"It really is."

Looking up at the sky, Homura was left in mute amazement.

A giant white wall rose high up into the distant sky.

It was a pure white skyscraper that drew a very gentle arc across the sky from one side of the horizon to the other, boldly filling up the canvas of the blue sky.

It was the most magnificent sight that Homura had ever seen until now, including the things she had imagined in her mind.

"……"

Completely numbed emotionally, Homura sank to the ground as if dizzy.

"Nutella also has several moons, but that Bagel is what stands out the most."

"Bagel? Is it… an aurora!? A moon!?"

"They're rings. Nutella's planetary rings. It's the same kind of celestial body as Saturn's rings. Their diameter is three hundred million meters."

"T-That's quite substantial…"

"Some people call it the [Round Table]. I prefer the name Bagel myself, though."

"…Huh? Touya-kun, your glasses?"

Having taken off his glasses without Homura realizing it, Touya showed her his glasses which he had stored away in their case.

"It seems that when I come here, my eyesight improves. I don't need glasses here. How about you?"

"…Hee, my eyes were good from the start."

"If you feel any changes in your body, tell us right away."

Misasagi-senpai had come out as well.

"Wah."

Homura drew back in surprise once again.

Now that Homura could see her again under the sunlight, she realized that Misasagi-senpai's appearance was no longer the same as the one in her memories.

"Senpai—?"

"Yes."

The colors of her eyes and skin were completely different. Her physique seemed to have also subtly changed.

What stood out the most was her silver hair with a faint bluish tinge.

"Humans who come to Nutella secrete special hormones due to the effects of being reconstructed in transport and of the Bagel's reflected light, causing their physical constitution to greatly change. I'm the type whose outer appearance changes and am classified as an Elf."

"E-Elf… To think the beautiful senpai would be perfected even further…"

"I was also shocked the first time I saw her."

The way Misasagi-senpai acted embarrassed as her two underclassmen stared at her was truly just like her. Her reaction stood out all the more when combined with her gestures and appearance.

"Touya-kun is… normal… Completely human, huh?" Homura remarked.

"You too, by the looks of it!"

"Once we're done organizing our baggage, we'll check Hinooka's physical condition. That is one of the objectives of this mission."

"I-I-I'm fine. Nothing about me has changed at all!"

"We have to check, since there are even some people who grow a tail, you know?"

"A tail!?" Homura panicked as she hurriedly pressed down her skirt.

"We'll also need a sample of blood from you."

"Am I a guinea pig!?"

After heating water that Touya drew from a nearby stream, they had a simple meal.

It consisted of vegetable soup and dried biscuits. All the ingredients had been taken from the food stocks stored in the cellar.

Touya's physical condition recovered before long as well.

The old castle had been used as the Exploration Club's base camp for a long time, having been modified for functional habitation and use. The tools stored here consisted half of items taken from Earth and the other half of items handmade here by the Exploration Club. Bedrooms were apparently prepared further inside as well, but they didn't use them much.

They had taken out a handmade table and set it up on the terrace.

While enjoying the savory soup that smelled of fruits and the picturesque view spread out before her, Homura asked a question.

"Were those crackling sparks I saw in the cellar [magic]?"

"Yes," Misasagi-senpai confirmed with a nod.

"Sorry."

Touya apologized while hanging his head, but Misasagi-senpai shook her head at his words.

Each time Misasagi-senpai's hair glittered in the sunlight, Homura couldn't help feeling her heart thump in shock, still not yet accustomed to her appearance.

"You can also cast magic, Touya-kun? Amazing."

"Like I said before, I failed to cast it. It's the most basic of basics. If you can't cast in an emergency, things can end pretty badly."

"How nice. I also want to learn how to do it! Please!"

"Of course," Misasagi-senpai assured her.

"But there are things you have to learn before that, okay?" Touya made sure to add.

"So stingy. What was that chant again… Hydra… Oxy… Surfer…?"

Homura held up her finger high with expectation in her eyes.

But nothing happened. It was the same even when she tried it again.

"—No good, huh? Well, I already guessed that, though."

"The chant isn't required. What's needed is your imagination. The chant is merely to aid that."

"I see, imagination, huh… Like this… a turtle's… wave…"

As Homura started shadow training by putting strength into her palms and shooting them forward, Touya gave a look of disbelief, but Misasagi-senpai watched over her kindly.

"I'd be overjoyed if Hinooka-san manages to become a Mage."

"Yes, I'll do my best! I'll definitely become one! I'll become the greatest Mage in the Exploration Club's history!"

"Really now."

Touya sighed.

"Thank goodness that senpai is a Magic Warrior. You can learn both fighting techniques and magic from her."

Hearing that, Homura's eyes lit up even more.

"A Magic Warrior!? An Elf Magic Warrior! I see. Ah, I wish I was also an Elf type~. Light-Weight Warriors are so stingy."

"What's with this attitude from a completely normal human?"

"There are also people whose bodies gradually change as they spend a long period of time here. I also looked closer to my Earth form here before."

"Hoh, is that so? Then there's still hope… Ah, that's right."

Suddenly realizing something, Homura took out a bundle wrapped in paper napkins from her breast pocket.

"That is…?"

"It's the pie that senpai made! It's the last leftovers. There was no way I was going to leave the last one to Mori-chan back home~"

"—Umm."

As Misasagi-senpai tried to say something, Touya made her stop with a look.

"?"

Homura made puzzled expression just as she stuffed her cheeks.

"…I… gurh…"

Homura made an expression as if she were chewing sand.

"Uuu… kuh… ugh…"

Teary-eyed, Homura shot a look of protest at Touya.

"It doesn't taste good, right? But you brought it without permission. Don't waste food."

The anxious-looking senpai held out some water to her/

"Food brought from Earth loses its nutritional value to an extreme degree here, except for certain flavorings. It's not as bad as poison, but if you eat too much, your stomach will…"

"Ugh, but… it was the pie that senpai worked so hard to make…"

While glaring at Touya reproachfully, Homura slowly ate up the pie.

Homura was still quite interested in their base camp at the old castle, but they immediately began preparing to depart for their mission after eating.

"We'll have time en route. You can ask the questions you want as we walk."

"But doesn't talking while moving use up a lot of concentration and tire you out…?" Touya humbly interjected.

"It's fine. Our journey this time won't be taking a rough path. It's a route that the Exploration Club previously cultivated," said Misasagi.

Completely ignoring Touya's worried expression, Homura asked another question in a carefree manner.

"—So, where are we going?"

Touya's head slumped in dejection. Misasagi-senpai also widened her eyes in disbelief.

"Huh?"

"See? This is the kind of person she is."

"In that case, I'll have to apply restraint as much as possible…"

"Don't worry. For some reason, I feel really lively right now! I could walk dozens of kilometers!"

With a thud, Homura draped her body over the backpack Touya was shouldering.

"Ugh."

"Touya-kun, my baggage is also included in here, right? I'll carry my portion myself."

"…What should we do, senpai?"

"Very well."

Misasagi-senpai allowed it so easily that it was anticlimactic.

"We'll have you carry it until we reach our first rest spot."

"Ro~ger~. Come on, hand it over."

Touya reluctantly divided up the baggage.

It included things like sleeping bags, underclothes, tableware, foldable mats, a medical kit and canteens. There were also survival tools that Homura had no idea what their use was inside.

The baggage was so heavy that it would make her recoil if this was a shopping trip, but it felt strangely light to her.

Nonetheless, the various tools were compact for the most part, and the majority of space was taken up by bundles of preserved foods separated from the rest.

"There are a lot of boxed lunches for just one night's stay… Are these reserves?"

"Yes, they're reserves. We'll be leaving the surplus behind."

"We're leaving food behind?"

"Our current destination is the 2nd relay camp. Relay camps are one of the bases that the Exploration Club has set up. When we have surplus, we leave as much equipment behind as possible and stock up."

"I see. Then does that case you're carrying also contain preserved foods, senpai?"

Homura looked at the sturdy case that was fastened to Misasagi-senpai's knapsack.

"This is…"

Just as she was about to reply, Misasagi-senpai suddenly smiled mischievously.

"A state secret, I suppose you could say?"

"Eh~, no way~?"

"It's something important. I'll show it to you once we reach the relay camp."

"You promise?"

The Exploration Club members finally finished repacking the baggage.

The final items that Touya and Misasagi-senpai equipped were weapons.

Misasagi-senpai equipped an arrow quiver and a collapsible composite bow, which was even smaller than the ones used in archery, on her back.

On the other hand, Touya attached two separate long and short swords to his waist.

"Oooh… A game… It's just like a game…"

While circling around the two of them to look them over, Homura spoke out in admiration.

"Like I thought, a dragon or something is going to come out, right…?"

When Homura leaned over and tried to lift up one of the sword's heavy scabbard without permission, Touya smacked her head.

"Yeah right! At most, a wild boar might come out… right?"

After he said that, Touya's expression suddenly became uncertain, and he looked over at Misasagi-senpai.

"That's right. And, considering the season right now, a bear might appear as well."

"……"

Touya stiffened as he placed a hand on the hilt of one of his swords.

"Umm."

Homura held out her hand greedily.

"I'd also like to equip a cool weapon, you know…"

"You planning to carry even more than you already have? You'll definitely wear yourself out, you know?"

"Very well."

"Eh, wait, senpai?"

Once again, Misasagi-senpai readily consented.

She went back once more to the armory and then returned soon after.

“In that case, take this—a folding knife. Properly speaking, it’s a tool for outdoor use, but it was made to be sturdy, so it can also be used as a weapon.”

Misasagi-senpai handed over a knife, which had its blade folded back into its hilt, over to Homura.

It couldn’t be compared to Touya’s swords, but Homura still felt sufficient feedback from wielding it. It might be even heavier than the biggest knife in the Hinooka family’s kitchen.

Putting in unexpected power into it, Homura timidly unfolded the blade.

“Th… This can fight off a bear?”

“Impossible. Hinooka-san, if you encounter a dangerous wild animal, please abandon all your baggage and run away.”

“Uh, that’s so uncool…”

“I’d also run away at full speed if I encountered a bear, you know,” Touya added in. “Fighting a lump of muscle like that is no joke.”

Misasagi-senpai nodded with a serious face.

“Of course, the first priority is to try not to meet such creatures. But the wild animals on Nutella don’t know humans. If they’re experienced with us, they should run away instinctively, but there are also cases where they approach out of interest. It’s still only been ten years since humans have arrived on Nutella. We still haven’t completely clarified what kinds of dangerous creatures live here.”

“……”

Homura looked back at Misasagi-senpai quite meekly.

“…Senpai… So you can talk in long sentences like that… And without stammering either…”

Homura’s head was vigorously smacked from the side.

“You! This concerns your life, you know! Listen at least a little seriously!”

“…Sorry.”

Chapter 10 END

1 Just in case it isn’t obvious enough in the translation, Misasagi’s speech changes slightly here compared to normal, which occasionally happens throughout the story. Her normal halting way of speaking (emphasized by the commas that appear everywhere in her sentences) disappears and she seems to speak much more smoothly in comparison.

Chapter 11

At last, Homura and the others departed from the old castle base camp.

"My first mission… my first expedition…!"

Homura was enthusiastic as she looked up at the sun high above and the white ring encircling Nutella.

The old castle, far behind them now, was the only sign of human habitation amidst nature as far as the eye could see. Homura couldn't even begin to guess how many months and years had passed as it overlooked this valley from high up on that hill. She suddenly felt lonely and painfully reluctant at the thought of it.

But the climate of the valley was so splendid that it blew away such forlorn feelings, and if it weren't for the obstructive baggage on her back, it would be the ideal weather conditions for hiking.

The Exploration Club had Touya as the vanguard and Misasagi-senpai taking up the rear, and they had descended the faintly visible and gently sloping path down the slanting meadow of the hill.

"Oh?"

Homura soon noticed an abnormality about her body which hadn't been clear inside the castle.

"So light?"

It was a strange feeling, like the springs in her knees were many times tougher and more flexible than before, as if she were walking above the clouds in a dream.

"Senpai, does Nutella have much weaker gravity than Earth or something?"

"The planetary gravity at this latitude is pretty much the same as Earth's."

"Then, this is…"

Homura hopped extra high as she walked as if she were bouncing on a cushion.

"Hinooka-san's physical abilities have improved."

"Wow, amazing… my body feels like a balloon."

As a test, she took a running start of several steps and jumped off the ground with all her strength, crossing over her intended destination by several meters and landing right next to Touya who was walking up ahead.

"Woah…!"

If Touya hadn't heard Homura's shout of glee and dodged to the side, it would have been a full-on collision.

"Hey, that's dangerous, you know?"

"Can I try running for a bit!?"

"Hey!"

Ignoring Touya's warning of restraint, Homura started running at full speed and had her heart swept away by the sensation of the surrounding scenery blurring past her all at once.

The cool wind blowing through the valley and the daytime heat beating down on the grass mixed together and caressed her cheeks. Each time Homura took a stride across the ground, she accelerated like a multi-stage rocket. The headwind passing over her head and making her hair flutter all over the place was so strong it hurt.

Even the feeling of all her weight shifting onto her feet with a bow-like curve was comfortable, and she couldn't help laughing as she marveled over how running could be so enjoyable.

She ran across the meadow in the blink of an eye and quickly approached the edge of the forest.

"Woah there—!"

Like a flying boat landing on water, she suddenly put on the brakes by kicking the ground with her heels, and then a shouting voice approached from behind her.

"You, acting so spontaneously again—!"

After approaching from behind her, Touya showily pitched forward and shakily fell to the ground next to Homura.

"You okay, young man?"

Homura peeked down at Touya's grimacing face as he lay with his body spread out on the grass.

"…I'm the not issue here. I'm more worried about whether your head's okay, suddenly running off when you don't know the route."

"That was amazing. I can't believe I can move like this! I have to tell everyone about this sensation!"

"Well, I understand how you feel there."

Lifting himself up, Touya sat crossed-legged on the ground.

Misasagi-senpai soon approached, smiling with no sign of being particularly worried.

"There are no distinguishable roads past this forest. Sprinting is even difficult for veteran investigators, so please maintain a set pace."

"Roger!"

"At least you reply well."

"Touya-kun, you also ran around until your shoes wore out on your first expedition, remember?"

"Heh? Your shoes? The ones procured through tax money? The precious shoes whose importance is only beneath that of our lives and food?"

Giving a sidelong glance at Homura as she made fun of him, Touya scratched his head.

"Senpai, don't mention that…"

While watching the river stream beside them as they walked, Homura and the others reached the forest.

At consistent intervals, conspicuous red ribbons tied to tree trunks appeared and showed them the correct path.

Their path was obstructed by rotten and hole-filled fallen trees, scree slopes with rocks scattered about where the river level became low, and bamboo grass thickets so high that only one's fingertips could reach past the top—for Homura, who was an innate napper, the hike would normally make her throw in the towel right away, but now she was able to finish it like a walk in the park.

Even so, the eeriness of the spider webs, which persistently twined around her hair, and of the anthills, which were so high she had to look up at them, left her dumbfounded.

"Phew… This truly is a primeval forest."

"Right? Apparently Earth was like this in prehistory."

While stuffing their cheeks with nuts and sugar-hardened taffy, Homura and Touya once again spoke out in awe and admiration.

Within the dim conifer forest, the chirping of birds could be heard to the point of being annoying.

Misasagi-senpai also surveyed their surroundings while putting her canteen to her mouth.

"Apparently, this place isn't completely untouched either."

"You mean there were vestiges of lumbering?"

"We've found traces of forest fires near this mountain stream, and they seem to have occurred periodically at a different place. It's too unnatural to be natural fires, so we think it was probably due to slash-and-burn agriculture being done in the area. We've also found grains that have returned to being wild in the vicinity."

"Then, people lived here? Nutellans!?"

"—Huh? Hey, hey, did you forget about our base camp?"

"Ah."

Homura pressed her cheek in realization.

"That's right… There's no way that that decrepit castle was made by our seniors in the Exploration Club either… Then, there really were Nutellans…!"

"It's certain that there were people here who possessed civilization," Misasagi-senpai said. "But we can still only guess what kind of people they were… Ruins like the one we use can also be found all over the place."

"Amazing, that's so romantic."

"Yes."

Misasagi-senpai smiled happily.

"It's considered a distinguished achievement if you can find a graveyard in good condition that no one has reported yet, you know?"

"I see… a graveyard or a tomb, huh? Like the pyramids, Taj Mahal, or Indi Jones…"

As Homura murmured as if daydreaming, Touya glared at her dangerously.

"Don't unnecessarily instigate her, senpai. She'll immediately get carried away."

"Aspiration is never a waste. It's the energy behind each and every one of our steps—Here."

As she said that, Misasagi-senpai took out some taffy from its paper wrapping and then pressed it into Touya's mouth.

"Nrgh—"

Touya quickly became red-faced.

"Me too, feed me too."

"Sure, Hinooka-san, here you go."

As Homura pestered her like a baby chick, Misasagi-senpai offered her taffy while smiling.

Touya remained red-faced as he pressed his lips.

As they traversed the forest while talking like this, thick clouds began to obscure the blue sky that peeked through the tree canopy.

Homura regretfully looked up at the sight of the Bagel covered over by clouds.

When they finally made it out of the forest, they came out onto a small ridge. It was a suitable place to look over the surrounding area, but the blowing wind had chilled in the afternoon weather.

"It's gotten a bit cold…"

When Homura tried to close up her chest buttons that had been open until now, she realized that they were fake buttons, and instead she once again zipped up the fastener hidden beneath the front of her outfit.

"How far have we come?"

"Let's look at the map."

Misasagi-senpai quickly spread out the map and changed its orientation according to the cardinal directions.

"This is the base camp where we started from… The river we've constantly seen to our right is this line. Our destination is the summit of this ridge—"

Homura peeked down at the map along with Touya.

"—Do you understand where we are right now?" Misasagi-senpai asked.

While recalling their path until now, Homura traced the route on the map with her finger.

"…Here… no, here?"

"How about you, Touya-kun?"

Touya silently pointed with his finger. His designated location was quite a distance away from Homura's.

"Muh."

"Touya-kun got it right."

"You're like a lost child."

"…This is the notification of a lost child. From beyond the Earth, that is…"

"You have general grasp of distance, Hinooka-san. We always choose a route with as little difference in elevation as possible, so you can judge our location and distance with the map's contour lines if you understand that."

"…Then that means we're still only halfway there, huh…"

"If you consider our return course as well, it's a fourth of our journey."

"Uwah, please stop."

Homura once more surveyed their surroundings.

And when she thought of how they still had to cross several mountains that lay ahead, she felt fatigue for the first time.

"We're moving at a good pace. There's no need to rush."

Misasagi-senpai carefully folded up the map so it wouldn't be blown away by the wind.

"We'll be going up and down slopes a lot from this point on. There are also some sharp ascents on our path. Hinooka-san, are there any problems with your physical condition? We can take a rest, you know?"

"I'm perfectly fine! …That's what I'd like to say, but the truth is, I'm a little tired."

After Misasagi-senpai exchanged a look with Touya, they moved towards a rock face under the shadow of the ridge where the wind wouldn't reach.

The Exploration Club group sat down against the rock face and took a breather.

"It really would be the best if there was a hot spring waiting for us at the end of all this walking, though," Homura grumbled.

Touya spoke up in agreement while stretching his knees.

"Yeah, a hot spring really would be nice! But I suppose that's asking for too much… There aren't any here, right, senpai?"

"None have been discovered in this vicinity."

"How unfortunate," the other two despondently replied at the same time.

"Hot springs are always accompanied by volcanoes, so they come with the danger of gas, and of course volcanic eruptions too. As such, places with hot springs are unsuitable for the Exploration Club's activities and bases."

"I see…"

"There's no need to be so disappointed. There's something better than hot springs waiting for us ahead."

"What?"

"What is it?"

"Look forward to it as a surprise."

Homura began to protest grumpily, though Touya managed to console her, and then he began to move the contents of her baggage to his own backpack.

"I said I would carry it myself, you mountain monkey…"

"It's because the footing is apparently bad up ahead."

"…Touya-kun, is it also your first time coming this far?"

"Yeah, I've only been as far as the forest earlier. I only know the rest by map. By the way, senpai… You figured out the cardinal directions without looking at a compass earlier. Are you familiar with this area?"

"Yeah, you figured it out right away."

True enough, the terrain was covered with many similar-looking ridges and the cloudy sky right now made shadows fainter and less distinguishable, so Homura hadn't been able to tell them apart at all with her amateur eyes. Furthermore, when an overwhelming landmark like the Bagel that cut a white path across the sky disappeared from sight, it made her feel quite anxious.

"Yes, that's right—This is a familiar route that I've passed through many times while setting up the relay base. Look, the mark on that rock is something I made with paint. It's become quite faded now. I should repaint it soon…"

Misasagi-senpai wore a nostalgic expression as she gazed at the path along the ridge ahead.

Homura suddenly looked over at Touya, and he was painfully watching senpai's face from the side next to her. It was as if Touya was sorrowfully reading something within senpai's mind that Homura knew nothing about.

Noticing Homura's gaze, Touya frantically looked away towards the scenery and scratched his head.

"Haha… When you've been in the Exploration Club for three years, I guess you can tell which direction you're facing even without a compass."

"I can tell, too."

"As if—wait, you actually can?"

Touya was startled. Homura raised her hand smugly.

"Yes! You know, you infer it based on the narrowness of a tree's annual rings—"

"That method doesn't work in places where the north side is slanted or strong wind makes the branches tilt to one side, you know? I tested it out myself."

Nodding at Touya, Misasagi-senpai pointed at her eyes.

"My eyes seem to be able to grasp geomagnetic lines. Only roughly, though."

"M-Magnetic lines?" Homura repeated confusedly.

"Geomagnetic lines… what do they look like?"

"It's hard to explain in words, but… It's kinda like a moiré pattern that's overlays my vision," Senpai murmured while focusing, and then her strangely-colored eyes clearly changed even further.

"Ooh… Can you avoid losing your way even on a pitch-black night?"

"No, that's beyond my abilities. But I can distinguish the direction at least."

"That's amazing enough on its own."

Though she acted embarrassed as Homura and Touya openly admired her, Misasagi-senpai still managed to gently chide the two of them.

"It's true that this is a wonderful gift on Nutella. But you mustn't overestimate your abilities and rely on them too much. You should think well and hard to ascertain what is your true power."

"……"

The two juniors continued watching her with even stronger admiration, causing Misasagi-senpai to turn increasingly red and shy away.

The three of them walked along the ridge.

They were walking on a long rocky path that Homura wasn't used to.

When she was having some trouble traversing the path, Misasagi-senpai called out to her from behind.

"Hinooka-san, please use this pole."

Senpai took out a light yet solid foldable cane. The pointed end was made so that it wouldn't slide across a rock surface. It was one of the tools whose use Homura couldn't figure out earlier.

"A cane…"

"It's quite convenient. It makes walking much easier. You lightly grip them with both hands like you're skiing and…"

"Umm, I'm fine, really. It looks like it'd be hard to keep my balance while gripping it."

"Hey, Hinooka? You should properly listen to senpai and—"

Interrupting Touya as he tried to reprimand Homura, Misasagi calmly continued speaking.

"In that case, how about putting on some gloves? It will get rid of the friction while you use both your hands."

"Sure…"

Homura reluctantly nodded.

Truthfully, her main reason for refusing the cane was that it had a clumsy image as something used by old people to her.

The gloves that Misasagi-senpai next took out were thin, but they fitted Homura snugly and perfectly protected her hands when she lightly hit them against a rock. The finger sleeves were also made to resist slipping.

These items were too uncouth to Homura's aesthetical senses, but their functional beauty put them in permissible range for her.

"Touya-kun, it's time to switch the vanguard position."

"…Ah, sorry. I unconsciously hurried too much."

Touya shamefully apologized, but Misasagi-senpai shook her head.

"No, not at all. I'll be taking a route that's as easy to walk through as possible, so make sure to follow while carefully watching my footsteps."

They returned to a single-file procession and started walking once more.

Their pace went down a bit, but the fact that they were advancing in bent-back postures didn't change.

The winding slope gradually became sharper, forcing Homura to almost crawl on all four limbs. The gloves unexpectedly helped a lot here.

"What is this, rock-climbing? But it's more like I'm crawling than climbing, right? Then is it rock-crawling? Am I a rock-crawler?"

Though Homura joked around like that, no retorts came from Touya.

When Homura couldn't vent herself by talking, her thoughts turned in unpleasant directions.

"……"

She felt as if her lump of stamina, which she had thought to be bottomless, had greatly diminished and become cold.

In her mind, Homura had imagined the Exploration as a group that gallantly conquered meadows while being caressed by a gentle wind beneath Nutella's majestic view, yet what was this?

What lay before her eyes were perfectly ordinary rocks, and dried earth in every direction.

Above them was just a dull cloudy sky, and furthermore the surroundings were covered in fog, spurring on the oppressive and suffocating feeling that gripped Homura. So plain; it was all completely plain.

Her hair became coiled in the damp air. Speaking of which, she hadn't looked at herself in a mirror since they had departed. The most she had done was wash her face in the river as they walked.

Up ahead, Misasagi-senpai's hair was beautifully smooth like a delicate doll's as usual, so much so that she could immediately appear in a cosmetics commercial just as she was.

Misasagi-senpai turned back to look at her.

"We'll be coming out onto a flat ridge just up ahead."

"Really?"

It would be a lie to say that Homura wasn't irritated at how Misasagi-senpai regularly turned around to confirm her pace.

Homura still couldn't believe her earlier words about how this was the easiest route. She felt like she had been deceived simply because senpai wanted to get her excited.

Simply because she wanted to see Homura's ungainly form as a result—

"……No, no."

As expected, Homura's thoughts didn't turn that mean and unpleasant, but she could clearly tell that Misasagi-senpai was lowering her usual pace. For some reason, Homura couldn't honestly accept the sight of her doing that.

They finally passed over the sharp slope.

The natural path bored into the ridge turned flat and level.

The fog turned into a distinct lump and passed over Homura and the others.

To the right was a rock wall that was at last too vertical to climb—

And to their left was a cliff. The bottom was far out of sight. The width of the long and narrow foothold they stood on was, at most, equal to the average height of a person. In some places, it was only a few dozen centimeters. Small enough to cover by stretching one arm.

However, it wasn't that shocking if you compared it to a small and narrow subway station platform.

There was a firm wooden bridge built across the places where the path was cut off here and there.

Obviously, it was constructed by previous members of the Exploration Club. Homura couldn't possibly understand the effort and passion that had gone into bring the necessary materials here using their own strength.

They crossed over the bridge without tasting any thrill.

They could just quickly pass over something like this without fear.

"If they went to the trouble of making these, they should have adding railings to them as—"

Suddenly, her feet lost the sensation of touching surface and her body was in the air.

She might have heard Touya dumbly say, "Ah."

"_____"

She wasn't able to let out a single noise.

In movies and dramas, this would be a scene where the person screamed as they fell. Definitely.

But Homura couldn't let out a single breath from her stiff and frozen body.

I'm going to die.

That fear alone ruled her entire body.

When she came to, she was lying face up.

She could only hear the faint thumping of her heart, as if she were at the bottom of a pool.

"F-Fall!"

She didn't understand where she was.

Within her narrow vision, there were only the cloudy sky and black pine branches that covered her view of the sky.

There was no sign of Misasagi-senpai or Touya nearby. She was alone.

"Rope! Be careful of falling rocks! I'll secure her!"

Hot. Her back was hot.

When she thought that, she realized that it was the sensation of rock pressing against her through her backpack.

It was slightly painful when she stirred.

Her palms, creeping down either side of her rear, touched a rough surface, but the heels of her feet didn't touch anything and seemed to be suspended in mid-air.

Speaking of which, immediately after crossing the bridge, she had stepped on a clump of grass, but beyond that grass had been a pile of unstable rocks… and she had no memory after that.

"—Don't move, Hinooka-san."

As she remained lying face up, she heard a voice from above her head.

It was senpai's voice. She sounded like she was somewhere very far away.

Sounds increasingly got closer, until finally they reached right beside her.

Senpai's face peeked down at Homura, looking upside-down from her perspective.

"Can you breathe? Do your lungs hurt?"

"……"

What should I say in reply—Even as she thought that, Homura only managed to half-open her mouth and slightly nod.

Misasagi-senpai quickly confirmed the state of Homura's body and then gently helped her sit up.

She gripped Homura's fingers with one hand and stroked her back with her other hand as she held her.

"You're okay," Misasagi-senpai whispered in her ear.

"…Senpai…"

She could finally speak again.

Senpai didn't move away as she continued holding Homura.

"Umm… I'm fine now."

"I'll stay like this a little longer until I calm down."

"Hah, sure."

Homura could hear senpai's heartbeat as their chests were pressed together. It sounded so clear to her that Homura wondered whether it was pumping far faster than her own.

While embraced by a warm body, Homura looked at their surroundings over senpai's shoulder.

They were on a small ledge that butted out midway down the cliff. Several big and small rocks were scattered about. Beyond that was once again the seemingly bottomless cliff precipice.

She had fallen about six or seven meters. The fact that she had fallen on her back and been cushioned by a thicket of creeping pines as she fell seemed to have reduced the damage to her body.

They remained there like that for about ten minutes.

While being pulled up by the rope from the top of the cliff, Homura was assisted by Misasagi-senpai from behind and managed to return to their original path. Climbing up the rock face with the rope had been anticlimactically simple.

"……"

Touya greeted her with a blood-drained face.

"Can you walk?"

"Yeah. My back was struck a bit, but my feet are completely fine."

"I see. Thank goodness."

It was then that Homura bowed her head deeply to the other two.

"I'm sorry. I wasn't paying attention."

Touya patted his chest in relief.

"I was shocked when you suddenly disappeared."

"No, I'm really sorry about that."

While Misasagi-senpai reconfirmed the location where Homura had fallen, Touya diligently cleaned the dust off the rope and stowed it away.

Afterwards, their group resumed traversing the ridge while exchanging few words between them.

"…What did you shout before?"

"Ah, I said 'Fall'. It was in order to inform senpai that you had fallen. Well, senpai seemed to have already noticed, though."

"Heh, 'Fall', huh? It doesn't seem like I'll ever have the chance to say it myself."

"…No, there's no way to be sure. Also, we use it to warn of falling rocks as well."

As they walked for a while exchanging bits of conversation, the path turned into a gentle descent and moved away from the precipitous terrain.

Suddenly, the memory of the precipitous path until now vividly rose up in Homura's mind.

"…Kuh…"

A chill reasserted itself through her body and her knees felt like the strength had been drained out of them.

If there hadn't coincidentally been a ledge there back then. If the branches hadn't broken her fall and she had hit the stone surface on her head. If she had been injured and left alone on that ledge. All alone, on this uninhabited planet.

She discreetly hugged her cowering body.

But at the same time, Homura only remembered the warmth of Misasagi-senpai, who was leading them down the path in front right this moment.

She wasn't alone.

By the time the clouds broke and an interval of clear weather seemed to peek down on them, the sky had become a deeper blue and soon became completely darkened.

The madder red sunset dyed the thin clouds, and the spectacle reflected by the lake below was too majestic to put into words.

There was also something abnormal about the wall in the sky that had appeared once more.

"The Bagel's been eaten away…"

On the opposite side of the horizon from the setting sun, a certain section of the Bagel was completely cut off.

"That happens when the Bagel enters Nutella's shadow. You can see it again at night."

"How mysterious."

The stars were twinkling above.

Among them, the ones that glittered the most brightly and noticeably were Nutella's satellites.

"Hinooka-san, you're also tired, right?"

“Yes, the truth is, my feet are completely worn out… Are we almost at the relay base?”

“It’s not that far away now, but we’ll arrive at the base tomorrow. Tonight, we’ll camp outside. There’s a good place to camp nearby.”

“So hungry,” Touya groaned out.

Misasagi-senpai let out a giggle and lifted up the bow on her back for a bit.

“I was going to cook a bird or rabbit as tonight’s treat for dinner if I could catch any, but they’re a bit far from here… Please make do with preserved food and soup for tonight.”

“That’s more than enough! Ah, so you have found wild animals. Anything like deer for example!?”

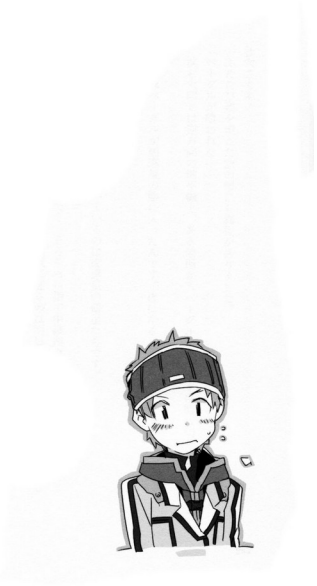
“Well, they’re similar to deer, but they’re an endemic species to Nutella,” Misasagi-senpai explained. “They’re quite tasty.”

“So you’ve eaten some before.”

“Senpai, enough with the talk of meat. It’s making me even hungrier.”

“But what are even more delicious are the ground mice lookalikes…”

Chapter 11 END



Chapter 12

As the day slowly turned to evening, the three of them managed to reach the camp while there was still light left in the sky.

The t-spot—Misasagi-senpai's nickname for the tent spot—was on an open plain, and a short distance away down an incline was a stream with abundant water.

Homura carried a complete set of tools as she followed Misasagi-senpai down to the stream.

Senpai piled up rocks from the river to make a hearth, while Homura drew water from the river using a hand-pump equipped with a water filter. It was quite a convenient tool.

Homura was quite excited by the extraordinary atmosphere, but she was still a girl with no prior outdoor life experience. The most she was allowed to do was use a fully-furnished barbecue.

Perhaps due to her efforts in training to make boxed lunches recently, part of her unexpectedly enjoyed the food preparations and touching various cooking tools.

Touya had remained behind further up to set up a tent. It was a cool-looking tent with the UNPIEP logo printed on it in large font, but—

Homura timidly asked Misasagi-senpai a question.

"Umm, senpai… could that tent be meant for three people…?"

"It can fit, three or four people, but we'll be split up, between a tent, meant for us, and a single tent, meant for Touya."

"Separate tents! Of course. Naturally. As expected."

"Yes. You'll receive detailed, instructions on that, kind of division from, Fujimori-sensei eventually as well…"

"Right."

"It depends on the time and place, though." Homura could have sworn hearing senpai murmur that at the end.

After having finished her work in the blink of an eye even while continuing to talk with Homura, Misasagi-senpai piled kindling in the hearth and then stepped back a bit.

"Hinooka-san, please come stand, by me."

"—? Sure."

Homura walked over next to her as she was told.

Misasagi-senpai brought her hands together in front of her navel as if clasping something and began concentrating hard.

"…Hi (Hydrogen)[1]…"

Magic…!

Homura's eyes widened.

"Ox (Oxygen)… Ph (Phosphate)… Mg (Magnesium)…"

A white light seemed to flash between Misasagi-senpai's hands as she chanted, and then a deep orange ball of fire appeared there.

"Something came out!"

The coin-sized fireball grew to the size of a baseball while superfine strands of flames whirled and swayed around it.

While maintaining her concentration, Misasagi-senpai moved the fireball downwards at a sloped angle. The fireball maintained a certain speed as it went and was absorbed into the hearth. The moment the fireball touched it, the kindling immediately ignited and burst into flames.

After lowering her hands and relaxing her shoulders, Misasagi-senpai added in more wood while making sure the fire remained stable.

"So that's also magic!"

"Yes. Fire-type magic isn't, my speciality… so I'm always tense, when I chant it."

As she spoke, Misasagi-senpai took out a waterproof lighter from her pocket.

"Ah, a lighter."

"This would, have worked too, but magic is useful, in its own way, so I use it, as practice at, times like these."

"Wow… amazing."

The fire burning in front of them illuminated the rocks around the stream so brightly and naturally that it was hard to believe that it had been created with magic.

"Hinooka-san, do you also, want to give, it a try?"

"S-Seriously? You don't mind?"

"Here, it won't turn, into a huge, fire."

"Please let me do it. This is Hinooka Homura's first step as a Mage!"

Misasagi-senpai nodded.

"Then, first of all, please imagine, a die painted, in four colors. Two faces, are white, and two faces, are blue. One face, is red, and the last one, is black. The color, arrangement is—"

"????"

After somehow having the rest of the explanation simplified enough for her, Homura followed senpai's instructions and took her first steps into the realm of magic.

She held out her hands together downwards at a slanted angle and stood in front of the hearth just like senpai had done.

While feeling the heat from the flames of the hearth on her palms, Homura formed the image in her head.

"…Hydrogen…"

"You can't cut off, your concentration. Otherwise, it will, explode."

"…O-Oxygen… Phosphate, Ma-Ma-Ma—"

Hearing a muffled explosion, Touya came running down to the stream, and there he found a cloud of black smoke enveloping the area.

"Wha… *cough, cough*… What's this black stuff!?"

Homura jumped out from the smoke while coughing.

"*Cough, cough*! D-Douya-gun, zenpai iz—"

While wringing out her voice, Homura turned around and pointed behind her.

"Senpai is inside this smoke!?"

Homura nodded with tears in her eyes.

My, this has turned into something serious, Touya thought as he prepared to jump in, but immediately after—

The two of them saw movement from the slope high above the river bed where they stood.

The dark and heavy smoke whirled and suddenly rose up in the form of a dome.

The dome gradually swelled and expanded, becoming a wall that quickly approached the two of them. Touya frantically moved to stand in front of Homura.

Just when it seemed like their ears were being subjected to pressure, a chilling thin membrane of water traced against their skin and passed by them, dampening their hair and clothes slightly in the process.

Afterwards, the black smoke completely scattered away, leaving only the stream which reflected the twilight sky and the dying residue of fire.

In the center of the now vanished dome, Misasagi-senpai stood alone as if nothing had happened.

Even when Touya and Homura ran up to her, she remained calm.

"What an, unfortunate failure. Let's try again, next time."

"—No, no, more importantly, are you really all right, senpai?" Touya asked.

"I'm fine," Misasagi-senpai said with a nod.

"Umm, I'm sorry. I messed up the chant… Did you also use magic just now, senpai?"

"That was my, specialty magic."

Senpai spoke with a strangely proud expression.

"What, so it was just Hinooka's magic exploding?"

"Wait, could it be that you knew that I would fail?"

"No, I believed, you could do it, you know? —About 50%, anyway."

"J-Just 50%?"

"Just having a 50% success rate when you first start using magic is pretty good on its own."

Homura felt relieved, but her stomach grumbled right afterward.

"Then I'll get it right for sure, this time! All right…"

Homura once again posed to chant in front of the hearth, while Misasagi-senpai immediately prepared to use her own magic and Touya pinched his nose in exasperation and stepped back.

"……"

In the end, they used the lighter.

The sun had completely set.

While listening to the murmuring of the river, the three of them cooked their dinner with the fire from the hearth.

Their main dish was soup cooked with dried vegetables and meat.

At Misasagi-senpai's suggestion, they chose their respective side dishes by drawn lot.

Three very similar looking packages were laid out on the ground.

"One of them, is the bad option. The expiration date, is very strict."

"Eeh~?"

“Fine, I’ll accept your challenge. But you’ll be the one eating your own words in the end.”

“Hey, Touya-kun, that’s a death flag right there, you know.”

“Hmm,” Touya hummed in concentration as he glared at the packages, while Misasagi-senpai just grinned.

“These preserved meals, were all thought up, and chosen by members, of the Exploration Club.”

“Are the ingredients from here on Nutella?”

“Yes. We search for, edible mountain plants, make vegetable gardens, cook bread, go fishing, smoke the food, and even use magic, to restrain decomposition…”

“Wow, you made it all the way from cultivating crops in the field? That’s a lot of work. My boxed lunch ideas pale in comparison.”

“It’s the same, you know? Both of them, are quite fun.”

Suddenly, Touya grabbed one of the packages.

“I’ve decided on this one!”

“Then I’ll take this one.”

Misasagi-senpai took the remaining one.

“Kuh—I got the bad option! Darn it! Just what is [Hell’s lunch] supposed to mean?”

Touya fell back with a flop.

The expiration date written in large letters on the package was dated to last month.

“Make sure to, properly eat it.”

Misasagi-senpai consoled him while smiling.

When Homura checked over her own package, it had the expiration date, the dish name [Chicken & Dumplings], and a handmade stamp on it.

“What’s this stamp with a goldfish and cat mark on it…?”

“Those are the, marks of me… and Inari-san. It’s a dish, we thought up, together.”

“……”

Touya’s face suddenly became clouded under the illumination from the firelight.

“Inari-san? You mean that Inari-san?”

“She’s an, Exploration Club, member… formerly, that is.”

“Ooh. Then she’s our senpai. But, even though her name is Inari, she has a cat mark? Not a fox[2]?”

“Yes, it’s a fox-cat[3].”

Misasagi-senpai smiled amusingly as she explained.

Meanwhile, Touya was challenging his preserved meal while feebly complaining.

“For it to taste so bad… or rather, it should be tasty, but… Anyway, it’s just so spicy…”

“So it was, still spicy, huh?”

Misasagi-senpai held out some water to him apologetically.

“What!? Were you waiting for the spiciness to go away!?”

“There was a senpai who was fond of spicy food, huh? And Touya-kun likes spiciness. Doesn’t everything work out that way?”

"This thing isn't a preserved meal! Once we return to base camp, I'm going to write a warning in red letters on it."

"Why don't you just throw it away?"

After this and that, they finished their dinner.

"Oww… My legs stiffened up while I was sitting…"

Standing up, Homura patted her legs while staggering.

"I really did a lot of walking."

"Senpai, I can put out the fire here now, right? We can make another one back up at the t-spot."

As Touya filled a pan with water in preparation, Misasagi-senpai shook her head.

"Please throw in all, the remaining firewood."

"…We're going to make a camp fire?" Homura asked.

"Ah, I had a feeling about that."

As he said that, Touya began throwing in the remaining firewood.

Misasagi-senpai took off her shoes and socks, and then took off her jacket as well, revealing a body suit underneath. She then walked into the shoals of the river.

"I know, you're tired, but I'd like, you to help, too, Hinooka-san."

"Eh, ah, sure, but—are we going to be catching fish or something?"

As Homura stepped in too, the clear and cool stream and rocky shoals felt achingly good on her stiff feet.

They began gathering up big rocks and using them to stem the river flow where the stream got a bit deep.

Homura moved the rocks as senpai told her.

"Uwah, there's something rustling between the rocks… There aren't any strange bugs or anything here, right?"

"Fortunately, there are no, land leeches, around here. But if you get, stung by something, make sure, to tell me."

"Stung, you say… I'll be careful…"

Soon, they completed a small dam on the river bed. It was quite well done for something made on the fly.

"Th… This is a children's pool! No, it's more like a bathtub."

"It's not a hot spring, like you asked for, though."

"Even so, it's quite effective on me! The important point is that it's an open-air bath! Really, if I was going to have to sleep while all dirty like this, I was considering quitting the Exploration Club."

"……"

"Ah, that was a joke, okay? Don't make that sad face, please."

"Hey, are you troubling senpai? —Anyway, is this good enough, senpai?"

Touya showed a shovel made of thick Y-shaped branches to senpai.

Senpai nodded and pointed at the deepest part of the path with the end of a stick.

"The white rocks, break easily, so avoid them."

"Roger… Here we go."

Touya used the wooden shovel to pick up rocks heated within the fire and threw them into the dam one after another, causing the water to noisily let out steam. It was a stone bathtub inside the river.

The water temperature was just right, making Homura eager to get in.

"Then, the female group which contributed to making it gets first dibs…!"

"Yeah, yeah, I get it. I'll be over at the t-spot."

"Since it's a promise, I'll say it just in case, but—don't peek! You better not peek!"

"I can massage your feet again, you know?"

"Ahaha, please give me a break. That tickled too much."

Back when Homura had a leg cramp during one of their morning running sessions, Touya had forcefully dug his thumbs into the back of her feet to massage it. Just remembering the ticklish feeling of it made Homura reflexively laugh out loud.

After leaving some towels for the girls, Touya went off into the grove of trees along the slope, and Homura warily watched him until his back disappeared from sight.

"…All right, he's gone… He's gone, right? Don't begrudge me for this, young man."

"Hinooka-san, I'm going, in first."

"Wah, faaaaaaast! So fast!"

When Homura turned around, Misasagi-senpai was already naked and wearing only a towel. Senpai stuck her toes into the shoals and tested the water temperature.

"I forgot about your changing speed, senpai. Y-You should be a bit more conscious of service for the viewers and such, you know…"

Undaunted, Homura also undressed and put her clothing down next to senpai's neatly folded clothes.

Observing Misasagi-senpai, Homura washed her body the same way she did with the cool water further downstream.

A stone bathtub they had made themselves. While being careful of the heated stones that were marked by a stick placed in the water, Homura nervously sunk her body into the bath.

It wasn't that deep, so when they sank down to their shoulders they had to stretch out like in a Western bathtub, but it was still wide enough for the two of them.

Homura let out a sigh and murmured to herself, "Dealing with sexual urges really is a problem for Exploration club members…"

"What was that?"

Misasagi-senpai, having been looking up at the night sky while leaning her back against the rocks and hugging her knees, turned to Homura calmly.

"No, err—huh?"

Homura noticed something unusual about senpai's hair as it was reflected in the dim light.

"Senpai, your hair color… returned to normal…?"

Misasagi-senpai nodded and lifted up her washed hair with the palm of her hand.

It wasn't completely black, but her hair had greatly regained its dark hue.

"Yes. My transformation seems, to have the quality, of reaching its peak, at noon, while Nutella's influence, on me weakens, at night."

"…Wait, does that mean there are also people for whom Nutella's influence gets stronger at night instead?"

Senpai nodded.

Homura carefully checked over her body, but no matter how she looked at herself, she was a normal human. There was no sign of seeing magnetic force lines or infrared rays when she strained her eyes to look around her either.

"It's a bit of, a waste for just, the two of us, to enjoy this view…"

"Yeah, true… Eh?"

Suddenly, Misasagi-senpai whistled with her fingers.

Soon after, a human silhouette came down the slope, and a troubled-sounding voice from beyond the tree thicket called out, "What is it?"

"Touya-kun's just like a dog…"

Ignoring Homura's comment, Misasagi-senpai said something unbelievable.

"Touya-kun, you come in, too."

Senpai called out to the thicket with a loud voice.

Homura doubted her own eyes and ears.

"Wait, senpai, what—"

"The hot water, we went to the, trouble of heating, will chill and, go to waste, by the time, he comes in."

"W-Well, I admit that's unfair for him and it might be kinder to Nutella's environment this way, but—"

Well, it was true that carrying over new heated rocks would be a lot of heavy labor.

"I guess, it's true that, dealing with sexual urges, is a problem."

"Wha—"

"Hey, that's harsh even for a joke," Touya shouted back while seeming to be heading back within the thicket, but Misasagi-senpai whistled at him again.

After several more whistles rang through area around the river, Touya finally gave up and came over while keeping his face turned to the side.

"Wah, wah, you're actually coming in—!?"

Homura frantically dragged up her towel, but when she did that it was too high to properly cover her waist…

Even as Homura felt like running away during the time it took for Touya to undress while grumbling to himself, Misasagi-senpai relaxed and stretched her body while taking a hand out from the stone bathtub and enjoying the cold sensation of the river water.

"……Uuugh…"

Homura glared over her shoulder at Touya as he entered the shoals with a towel around his waist.

"…It can't be helped, it's the club president's order."

"There, come in from there."

“Yeah, yeah,” Touya grumbled in resignation as he stepped over the rock dam.

“—Thanks for the bath[4].”

“Eh, what’s with that?”

“What do you mean?”

“Do you always say that when you go into the bath?”

“I do.”

“Don’t! It sounds rude in a situation like this.”

“We always say it in my family.”

“It’s weird, weird I say! And it’s kinda lewd too…”

“Don’t say lewd.”

When Touya sunk down into the stone bath, the width of the bathtub was just right to fit them, as if it had been made to fit three people from the beginning.

However, Homura had her body bended forward and was clearly keeping at a distance, while on the other hand, Misasagi-senpai was far too defenceless, and the black speck Touya, who was stuck between them, was unable to look either left or right and so had no choice but to look up.

“Wow… this really is nice…”

Noticing what he meant, Misasagi-senpai also leaned her back against the rocks and gazed up at the night sky.

Homura also took her first hard look up at the night sky.

The sky commanded the view from the shallows of the river where the tree thicket cut off.

Currently, the Bagel was a thin triangle like a cut-up cake, and it shone so brightly in the night sky that you could even read a book under it.

Furthermore, countless stars twinkled brightly, in no way losing to the Bagel, and they could see every detail of the Milky Way.

“Can you see it—Hinooka-san, Touya-kun?”

Misasagi-senpai raised her hand high and drew a huge arc across the sky with her finger.

The space in the sky normally occupied by the Bagel was, at a glance, a pitch-black and boorish area that hid the stars, but… when you looked closely and strained your eyes, you could see gently-sloping arcs of light that countlessly overlapped.

“A night rainbow…”

It was the rainbow pattern of the Bagel that wasn’t clear during daytime, because of the brightness.

“The color is completely different along with the band.”

“Yes. It looks, even more beautiful, at midnight.”

When you figured out the structure, the patterns could be distinguished even more clearly.

Faced with this wondrous sight that she had never seen before in any planetarium, Homura let out a sigh of awe.

1 Regarding magic: When the characters chant, they use abbreviations of chemical elements and compounds. (For example, Hydra for Hydrogen, Oxy for Oxygen, and Magna for Magnesium.) However, the terms used often make less sense in English due to Japanese’s unique naming sense, so I fully write out the intended chemical name to avoid confusion among the readers, despite how it changes the original text.

2 Inari: It comes from the name of a fox deity of harvests, hence Homura's question.
3 The pun used here doesn't translate into English, so I'll explain it. Misasagi says "Kitsuneko" here, which combines the words "Kitsune" (Fox) and "Neko" (Cat).
4 Here, Touya says "Itadakimasu", the phrase used to express gratitude before starting a meal in Japan. While it can be used to suit situations like these, it makes less sense in English, so I had to adjust the phrasing to make it sound better.

"…There are many, offered explanations for why, the rings that serve, as Nutella's shadow look, multicolored like that—like it being from, a complex series of, reflected light from, the sunlit side, of the rings, or that it receives, solar wind just like, the aurora phenomenon. There are even, strange theories like, they are supplied with, magnetic energy from, the interior of Nutella, and glow like, a fluorescent lamp."

"…Even if you take a picture of one of the rings, it's only when you look at it close up like this that you notice a lot of strange and wondrous things, huh?"

"Yes."

Just how many mysterious and unknown things were still hidden on this vast planet?

"In winter, the Bagel hides the sun."

"Eeh, I'm not good with cold."

"In exchange, it's quite hot, in the summer."

"I hate heat even more. It makes my eyes feel like their burning."

"How do you get by if both cold and hot are no good for you?"

"Normal people are all like that, you know."

While light-heartedly arguing together, Homura and Touya fully enjoyed the night sky.

Falling stars cut across the sky repeatedly, and, occasionally, they saw light run across the rings like a small wave.

Misasagi-senpai, who had been mostly staying out of the conversation between the two of them, suddenly spoke up.

"Hinooka-san… Please don't, begrudge Fujimori-sensei, okay?"

Senpai's formal tone made even Homura inclined to listen attentively and raised her body a bit.

"…Are you referring to how I was kidnapped—suddenly brought along here like this?"

"Yes."

Misasagi-senpai hung her head apologetically.

"You still don't, approve of it, right?"

"……"

Homura suddenly hurled hot water into Touya's face, and stood up in a half-risen posture and moved next to senpai.

"Hey, I wasn't even looking!"

"It was a fish, a fish jumped up and splashed you."

While saying that lie as an excuse, Homura sat down on the submerged rocks with her shoulder side by side with senpai.

As water dripped down from her forelocks, senpai's eyes faintly reflected the purplish-red color of glowing embers that still remained on the river bed.

"I'm already over that, senpai."

"…Hinooka-san."

"We… Well, it's true that I would have hesitated a lot if I were warned about today's route with an explanation video beforehand, though."

Misasagi-senpai smiled.

"…The Transport Ring requires, a period of charging, in proportion to, the number of people, being transported. The preparations were, already finished, a while ago, but then the possibility, of Hinooka-san joining, came up, and it was, delayed… I also wanted, us to come together, if possible."

"Does that mean… you and I alone might have gone ahead first, senpai?" Touya asked.

"Hinooka-san would have, experienced transporting, a bit later on. Until then, she was supposed to, receive standard training…"

Senpai looked up at the sky with far-gazing eyes.

"It's a, matter of course, on Nutella, but even in training, there's no guarantee, you won't get hurt. In the training program, directed at middle-schoolers, 60% of applicants, give up at, the first stage. They get hurt, and develop fear, and the stance of, their formerly cooperative guardians, can suddenly change… there are even cases, where the person, in question didn't, have the will, to participate from, the beginning…"

Touya nodded and interjected into the conversation.

"Those statistics are a result of the club's accident ratio being no different from that of martial arts sports clubs."

"Mori-chan also emphasized that to my parents."

"I'm not surprised. There are a lot of people who say that Japan is overprotective compared to other countries. Even though the invested budget is quite substantial, the scale and results of our country's program are far too small by comparison, they say."

"Is that also posted on the internet?"

"No. This is from the online community established among Exploration Clubs, separate from the public internet. I'll teach you how to use your terminal for it once we get back."

"Yes, please do. Other Exploration Clubs… huh. Yeah, we aren't the only ones, are we?"

"It's better, that way. Everyone is, one of our, precious comrades."

The hot water was starting to feel lukewarm at that point.

Homura's body had been completely warmed up and the stiffness in her overused muscles had also pretty much come undone by now as well. It seemed to be about time for her prolonged bath time, excluding the mixed-bathing part, to end.

However—

"How about, I tell a, ghost story?"

"Eh? All of a sudden?"

"What? T-That's out of nowhere."

Misasagi-senpai suddenly brought it up.

The ends of her stretched legs splashed against the water.

"It's a ghost story, passed down in, our Exploration Club. There was once, a valley of fog, where once you entered, you would never, come back—"

"Wah, wah, I love scary stories. Can't we listen to it in the tent, senpai?"

"We can't," Touya interjected. "According to the schedule, we have to get up pretty early in the morning. We have to go to bed soon."

"……"

"…Senpai?"

After being rebuked by Touya, Misasagi-senpai sank down to her mouth in the hot water with a displeased face.

"Nyet[1]."

"Umm… even if you say that…"

Senpai protested while making bubbles on the water surface.

"…But, in our tent, Touya-kun won't, be there, you know?"

More bubbles.

"You should just forget about him. After all, he's going to be busy tonight. He'll be sorting, labeling and going through his treasure mental video Blu-Rays from today."

"Hinooka, you really do run your mouth… Hmm?"

Ignoring their banter, Misasagi-senpai put something in her mouth. Following Touya's gaze, Homura also looked at her.

Misasagi-senpai was holding a canteen made of bamboo.

"Senpai, what are you drinking? Is it shampoo or something…?"

"Of course, not. It's juice, you know?"

Speaking of which, Homura had noticed her extending her hand outside the stone bath sometimes. Misasagi-senpai had apparently been secretly quenching her thirst with it.

"Juice? Can I also have some?"

"No. It's still, too soon, for you."

"What do you mean, too soon? Can't you give me just a little bit?"

"No. This is, the special privilege, of an upperclassman."

Smiling mischievously, Misasagi-senpai lifted up her canteen and kept it away from Homura.

This time, the instant Homura indignantly reached her hand out to it, senpai hugged Homura. Without minding the fact that their towels were coming off.

"Got, you."

Homura was taken aback.

After grabbing her with a loud splash, Misasagi-senpai rubbed her cheeks against Homura's chest while giggling.

This was the second time today Homura had been embraced by senpai, but this was a completely different situation from before.

A sweet scent mixed in with the steam gently tickled Homura's nose.

"The blood is rushing to senpai's head—no—she's drunk!?"

Touya picked up the bamboo canteen that had been left to float in the water and gave it a quick sniff and taste.

"This is fruit wine. Probably from hardy kiwi or some similar fruit."

"Oh no… The discovery of a scandal!? Rather, is senpai in a drunken frenzy!?"

"It might have just fermented naturally, but I don't think senpai would fail to notice that…"

While murmuring with a dumbfounded tone, Touya turned around and began walking to the shore.

"Well, I leave the rest to you…"

"Wait a minute! What am I supposed to do about this!?"

"You'll have to look after her, Hinooka."

"Don't run away! I can't do it alone! It's impossible for me!"

Suddenly turning her head around as she leaned against Homura's chest, Misasagi-senpai then jumped on Touya as he was trying to get out of the stone bath.

"Owah."

"Got you, too, Touya-kun."

"Wait, stop, senpai, you're putting in too much strength. Hinooka, do something!"

"I-I-It's fine, it's fine already, so just bring her back to shore like that! I'll permit it!"

"Ah—right!"

"Senpai!? We're getting out of the bath now! I'll wash your body, so don't move!"

After that, they brought senpai, who could no longer stand at that point, back to shore, and Homura quickly dried senpai's hair and body before getting Touya to reluctantly carry her. Senpai, who was basically naked with only a towel around her chest, had lost all strength and hung loosely in Touya's arms.

"Please bring her up to the tent! I'll go get our clothes!"

"All right."

"Keep both your eyes firmly closed! Watch the path since it's dark! And don't turn to look at me!"

"Don't ask so many unreasonable things at once. You hurry up too."

Homura was trying to shrewdly change into her clothes by herself.

"W-Wait, don't leave me alone in a place like this!"

"No, I'm not waiting. I'm going."

Giving up, Homura ran after Touya in only a towel while carrying their clothes.

After having changed into a shirt in place of sleepwear, Misasagi-senpai fell into a complete drunken unconsciousness on top of the sleeping bag laid out within the tent.

After having changed as well, Homura stepped out of the tent, just as Touya had come back from going to the river and cleaning up the fire.

"How is she?"

"She's asleep. Her condition doesn't seem that bad, so I think she'll be fine once she wakes up…"

The two of them peeked through the entrance to the tent.

Within the dim tent, senpai was quietly breathing in her sleep. It seemed they really did have nothing to worry about.

"But that was a shock. For that level-headed senpai to end up so…"

"It was a big help having you here to take care of her, Hinooka."

Touya bowed his head in thanks, and Homura puffed out her chest proudly.

"Yeah, you got that right. As expected, this isn't the kind of thing that you could have taken care of."

"This is the first time I've seen senpai like this—she was probably happy. That you entered the Exploration Club, that is."

"……I see. But you're also an important club member, Touya-kun."

"Well, I suppose that's true."

Touya made a new fire next to the tents.

As Touya watched the fire while hanging the wet towels and washed socks out to dry, Homura sat down next to him.

"You can go to sleep already, Hinooka. I'm going to stand watch here for a little while longer."

"Are you planning to stay up all night?"

"…No. The truth is, there's no need to stand on watch. The place we've come to isn't that dangerous."

Touya smiled wryly and scratched his head.

"When I come to Nutella, I get excited and can't sleep that much. Like, it's a waste to spend time sleeping…"

Touya looked up at the night rainbow in the sky as he spoke.

Homura nodded and looked up at the night sky as well.

"Ah~, I stayed out overnight without getting my parents' permission. My dad is probably furious right about now."

"Mori-chan will have taken care of contacting our homes at least."

"I wonder about that."

The sound of kindling splitting and popping in the fire. The slight murmuring of the river.

Homura and Touya's silhouettes swayed side by side and cast shadows on the wide open ground amidst the forest.

That comfortable silence was broken by Homura finally opening her mouth after hesitating a little.

"The third club member… is that Inari-senpai?"

'The Exploration club has three members'—those words which she had heard from Rokujizou-senpai before she joined the club had always been bothering Homura.

"Yeah." Touya nodded after a brief pause of silence.

Rather than Touya having hidden that truth, his sad expression made Homura think that he just didn't want to talk about it as much as possible.

"…I see, so it wasn't referring to that Ameno girl. Misasagi-senpai said she was a former member, though. Did that person quit the club?"

"Inari-senpai is a second-year student. The Exploration Club is treating her as skipping club activities, but she doesn't even come to school either. She hasn't been attending classes for several months now."

"She's skipping school?"

That goldfish and cat stamp.

Senpai's smiling face as she boasted of it happily earlier.

The bond between the two of them was so clear, and yet—

"Was the Exploration Club the cause? Did something happen on an expedition or something…?"

"I went to Inari-senpai's house before, after hearing about it from Mori-chan."

"Uwah," Homura exclaimed with a bitter smile. "Your dynamism really is amazing, Touya-kun. I can't tell whether you're bold or can't read the atmosphere. Then, you met Inari-senpai… or not, by the sound of it…"

Touya shook his head, as if to say, 'She was unapproachable.'

"I only talked with her over the interphone—'Don't get deeply involved with the Exploration Club,' she said, in a nasty voice."

"…And then?"

"I shouted back, 'I don't need your advice.'"

"You said that to someone who was not only an upperclassman, but a truant too—!?"

"……" Touya pressed a finger to his lips.

Homura had forgotten.

Recalling senpai's presence in the tent, Homura lowered her voice.

"You didn't have to go that far…"

"As if I care. She abandoned senpai and ran away."

"Hah… Based on your words, you didn't even ask her whether something happened, huh?"

"…Mori-chan said it was a personal problem and wouldn't tell me the specifics."

Touya hung his head with a brooding expression.

Homura was impressed by the seriousness in his face and words.

"…I could tell right away that there was another club member when I saw the list of names and personal lockers in the club building. But when I asked senpai about it, she just said that 'Inari is a member that has already quit' and that 'she's a former club member'. There's no way it's as simple as that, right?"

Hesitantly, Touya spoke in a painful tone.

"There's no way that senpai abandoned her. She's the one that abandoned senpai."

After letting out a huge sigh, Homura stretched herself.

"Your senpai-fixation is quite strong, Touya-kun."

"What was that?"

"Touya-kun, you like senpai. You're serious about Misasagi Mayo."

Staring silently at the flames without answering, Touya blushed red up to his ears.

Shrugging, Homura spoke up.

"You don't get it, do you?"

Homura stared hard at Touya while also giving a slightly teasing smile.

"In that case, you shouldn't have invited me to the Exploration Club. That way, you and senpai would have been alone with just the two of you. All smiling and excited."

"Huh?"

"Well, you're already plenty like that even now, though."

Homura slapped Touya's shoulder.

"I'm saying that you should support Misasagi-senpai, Touya-kun."

"…It's no good like that."

The side profile of Touya's face as he hid half of it by sinking down into his arms wrapped around his knees was very serious, yet also lonely, looking like that of a child who'd been left behind.

"……"

While Homura searched for words to say, Touya suddenly stood up.

"I'm going to sleep now. Make sure to get up on time tomorrow."

"No way. I don't even have an alarm clock here."

Touya tossed a small-sized spring watch.

It was currently at a standstill and didn't display the current time, but it could apparently be made to count time within twelve hours with the dial. In other words, it was a kind of timer.

"Senpai has a watch, so sync that to it."

After saying that, Touya disappeared into his own small tent.

Homura was left alone in front of the open fire.

Still not feeling very sleepy, she continued staring at the flames.

"…What's no good, geez…"

Before she realized it, she had completely fallen asleep.

When she woke up, the fire was already embers, emitting merely a slight warmth.

The t-spot was dark and wrapped in silence.

When she looked up at the sky, the night rainbow had finally become bright and vivid, just like senpai had said.

"…The Bagel, huh?"

Letting out a sign of admiration, Homura laced her hands behind her while gazing at the sky.

Several shooting stars shot across the sky in just a short instant.

They were much faster and emitted a much more striking brilliance than the shooting stars that Homura knew of through video footage only.

Here on Nutella, there were no shopping malls, lined-up brand stores, or 3D movie theaters. However, just happening upon this breath-taking sight made Homura feel that coming here was plenty worth it.

"A tomato… Cheese… That's sesame… Honey… Pumpkin… Blueberry…"

As her eyes chased over the rainbow, a star drifted past the edge of her vision.

Suddenly, she turned her head in that direction, puzzled.

Within the darkness of the trees, she saw another one—no, two.

Small, blue stars drifted quietly over the ground while flickering. No matter how many times Homura rubbed her eyes, they didn't disappear.

The blue stars silently increased in number and began to glitter as if to surround the t-spot.

"Senpai… Touya-kun…"

Homura tried to back away from the fire and call out to the two sleeping within the tents.

Immediately after—she heart a short breath.

"……"

Unable to speak out, Homura cringed in fear.

The sound of something trampling over fallen leaves and pebbles came from behind her.

The strange stench that faintly tickled her nose was the smell of a beast. The unpleasant, bloody smell that you would find in a zoo cage.

Remaining sitting in front of the fire, Homura was unable to even stir an inch as her body stiffened in order to desperately pretend to be asleep.

"……"

She heard the sound of a backpack falling down. She could clearly sense a presence searched through the baggage containing ingredients while sniffing.

That sound made Homura finally recall her own bag right behind her, as well as her only weapon in it, her knife.

She sensed something cautiously approaching.

"……Kuh…!"

Turning around while staying focused, Homura grabbed the knife from her backpack and prepared herself.

While trembling at the sensation of someone pulling her bag, Homura swung down her knife.

"——!"

A small silhouette silently leapt back.

It did a sudden somersault, landed far away and then crouched down.

What fell onto the ground around Homura was the taffy she had put into her baggage.

Her knife, which had cut through empty air without hitting anything, trembled minutely as the blade remained only halfway extended.

"…Hii… uuh…"

Somehow managing to cheer up her flabbergasted knees, Homura faced the small silhouette.

"W-What… Who…?"

It was all she could do just to say that much.

Several low growls resounded and grew closer from the surroundings.

Several seconds of fear passed while she remained facing the silhouette.

At last, the sound of a clicking tongue rang out, and the growls stopped.

"……"

The small silhouette turned on its heels and ran swiftly into the forest. Large beasts also ran after the shadow, quickly fading away into the distance.

In less than a few seconds, the visitors had completely disappeared from the t-spot, leaving only a faint smell behind.

"……Uuh…"

Homura sank to the ground.

She tore off the fingers that held the knife as if it were someone else's hand and threw it to the ground.

Without paying any mind to taking care of the scattered baggage or extinguishing the fire, Homura ran into the tent.

"…This is a dream… This is a dream…"

Murmuring that to herself as she shivered, she slid into the sleeping bag and clung to the asleep senpai's back within it. While sinking down to her head in the sleeping bag, she managed to fall asleep while paying attention to only senpai's quiet breathing and slight warmth.

"……"

The small silhouette that she had faced over her backpack—

It had definitely been human.

Chapter 12 END

15 Nyet: Russian for "no". (Typesetter Note: Yes, I know the footnote number in the text is wrong. Indesign is being a bit of a real tosser.)

Chapter 13

It was still dim outside the next morning when they got up.

The three of them had a light breakfast and finished their preparations to depart.

Unable to bear the awkward silence that hung in the air, Touya finally spoke up.

"…Hey, somebody say something already."

Homura remained silent while biting her lip.

"Hinooka, I'm not angry about you forgetting to wake up anymore. Senpai managed to get up first on her own anyway…"

Senpai and Touya had prepared breakfast on their own, while Homura had crawled out of the tent just as they were finishing up.

Ever since then, Homura hadn't spoken at all no matter how much Touya called out to her.

"You too, senpai."

On the other hand, Misasagi-senpai was just moving around silently, and whenever Touya said something to her, she would blush and curl into herself like a wilted flower. She'd been like this ever since she got up.

"There's nothing wrong with your physical condition, right, senpai?"

"No, I'm fine…"

Senpai nodded and spoke in a voice that could barely be heard.

She didn't appear to be suffering from a hangover like Touya had secretly feared, but she was burdened by self-loathing and so ashamed of herself that it was pitiful just looking at her.

"……"

The three of them sipped some instant coffee after their meal.

The sun still hadn't risen above the forest trees, but the chirping of birds could already be heard all around them, completely waking them up as they started to act for the day.

Touya defiantly tried to blow away the silence.

"Yesterday evening was really fun. That stone bath was awesome! It actually made me feel relieved to see senpai cut loose like that."

"But I should have remained the most level-headed as the club president…"

"It's not that big of a deal. Rather, it was quite beneficial for me—"

Touya exaggeratedly scratched his head and purposely left himself open for a retort, but Homura still remained silent as she chewed on her cup. His attempt to lighten the mood had failed.

"Sorry… If you could give me another ninety seconds, my self-reflection mode will end, so…"

"Ah, yeah. Sure."

No matter what Touya said, the mood remained like this.

Homura and the others departed from the t-spot and once more returned to the path leading to the mountain ridge that was their destination.

After a while, Homura suddenly stopped walking and spoke up.

"Let's go back already."

Touya and Misasagi-senpai turned around in surprise and approached her with puzzled faces.

"What? Go back? From here?"

"…Hinooka-san."

Senpai walked up to Homura worriedly.

"I don't want to go any further."

Touya spoke without hiding his anger.

"The relay camp is just ahead, you know? You can already see it just beyond that mountain ridge. It's a really easy path compared to the sunken road we walked yesterday, you know?"

"…Are you tired, Hinooka-san? Do you need to rest for a little bit?"

"No. I just don't care about the mission or whatever anymore and want to go home…"

Homura stared at the Transport Ring on senpai's finger.

"Can't we immediately return to Earth from here with that ring?"

"……Hinooka—"

Touya tried to draw near Homura angrily, but Misasagi-senpai stopped him gently and spoke in a calm tone.

"We can. However, it's a method that's used for emergency withdrawal and one that we want to avoid using as much as possible. We might not necessarily return to the club building's transport room if we do that. In order to avoid accidents, it's necessary to return to the base camp where we can stabilize the transport."

"…Then I want to head straight back to the base camp."

"……"

Misasagi exchanged glances with the disappointedly crouching Touya, and then firmly made up her mind and spoke.

"Very well. We'll go back."

"W-Wait, senpai. The goal's right in front of us, you know?"

"No… Touya, please don't be angry and listen."

Facing the other two, Misasagi-senpai spoke formally.

"I'm the one who forced Hinooka-san into this without sufficient preparation. Even after the falling accident yesterday, Hinooka splendidly managed to cheer up and come this far. There's no need to worry about the mission. This is our goal."

Touya still didn't seem convinced, but he was unable to say anything after hearing all that and so just nodded in response.

"Hinooka-san, don't worry about it—saying you can't do it when you can't is very courageous.

The trip back will be a constant downhill route, so we'll arrive by noon."

Senpai smiled and gripped Homura's hand as she said that, and the warmth of her fingers shocked Homura and made her come back to her senses.

Even so, she was unable to say anything, and could only start walking after senpai who had changed course. Homura was the one who had wished for that, after all.

"……"

Touya's silence as he passed her stabbed into her heart.

The sky was dyed in the pink color of dawn.

Homura followed silently a bit behind senpai and Touya as the two of them talked. Senpai's kind expression when she turned to look back sometimes made Homura unable to calm down inside.

On the other hand, Touya completely ignored Homura and didn't turn around even once.

"……What's with you…? Who was the one who brought me into the Exploration, huh…?"

Irritated, Homura picked up a pebble and threw it.

Even then, Touya continued to ignore her, even though he definitely had to have noticed.

Her fourth throw at last hit the back of his head.

"Oww… Hinooka, you…"

Touya turned around, but then came to a stop in shock.

Tears were flowing down Homura's cheeks as she glared in frustration. Even so, she didn't wipe away the tears and endured them while sniffling.

"…Kuh…"

Unable to bear it any longer, Homura turned her face down and crouched down right where she stood, and Misasagi-senpai gently approached her.

Even as she felt senpai's hand on her shoulder, Homura threw another rock at Touya.

"…Stupid… Stupid Touya… What's with that sword, it's just for show…"

"W-What?"

"…I was really scared… I was alone while the rest of you were asleep…"

Homura sobbed.

Senpai and Touya exchanged looks.

"…Did something happen last night?"

Homura nodded.

Coming down to his knees next to Homura, Touya bowed his head apologetically.

"I see… Sorry, for not noticing."

"……"

"…Can you tell us about it, Hinooka-san?"

Homura quietly nodded at senpai's words.

Finally feeling relived, Homura haltingly told them both about what happened last night.

Even after hearing her story, Touya seemed dubious.

Senpai also considered it with a meek expression.

"—It might have been a herd of mountain dogs. I once heard howling in this area a long time ago… But they might have come close again after the Exploration Club started to use this route less frequently…"

"It might just be a misunderstanding on my part… or a dream… that I saw."

As Homura mumbled while rubbing her swollen eyes, Touya tried to cheer her up.

"That sounds so weak-hearted, Hinooka. It doesn't sound like you at all, you know?"

Homura glared at Touya with a sidelong look.

"Then do you believe that I encountered a human?"

"Ugh… That's… You should have woken us up back then."

"Well, sorry about that…"

"Did you talk with them?" asked senpai.

Homura weakly shook her head.

"No, they didn't say anything."

Touya picked back up his baggage and stood up.

"Shall we return to the t-spot near the river and examine the area?"

Homura's body trembled at Touya's suggestion.

Misasagi-senpai anxiously watched her reaction.

"…No, let's not. It's enough if we do so at another time. We'll go back using a different route, crossing over the rival shoals to hide our scent.

"I see. Roger."

As senpai and Touya began to resume the journey back, Homura called out to stop them.

"I'm sorry, senpai, Touya-kun, but—"

As the two of them turned around, Homura deeply bowed her head towards them.

"I want to walk till the very end. To the relay camp at our destination. To the top of that ridge."

Touya happily looked over at Misasagi-senpai.

Still concerned, Senpai questioned Homura.

"Are you all right with that? Even if it's an easy route, it can be dangerous if you don't properly concentrate."

Homura nodded with a serious face.

"Please let me do it. If I give up here, I… won't be able to forgive myself."

"……"

As senpai considered it, Touya urged her.

"Let's go, senpai. Hinooka is strong when it counts."

"Very well."

Senpai smiled.

"Then let's work hard for just a little while longer, everyone."

"Yes!"

"Yeah."

As if competing with the sun, the three of them climbed the last of the mountain ridge path.

Today was also clear weather, and the temperature quickly rose.

After an hour of climbing without breaks, they finally caught sight of the cabin that lay at their destination.

It was at the top of the mountain ridge, with a few trees growing here and there and a beautiful view to behold. They had arrived at the destination for their mission this time, the relay camp.

There was the old tree there that stood tall like the king of the mountain ridge, and on it was a lightning rod that had been installed by the Exploration Club, making it look like a crown.

"We made it!"

The cabin made by the Exploration Club had awaited them while enduring the wind and snow at this altitude.

They used pliers to remove the nails attached to the door to keep it shut.

"It really is a relief to see something man-made after so long," Touya murmured as he used the tool in an experienced manner.

"Sorry, Touya-kun. We can't stay here that long…"

Misasagi-senpai climbed up a nearby tall boulder and threw pieces of grass into the air while watching the wind.

"What're you doing? Are you going to fly in the air?"

"That's correct, Hinooka-san."

"Heeh?"

"Want to try?"

After saying that, Misasagi-senpai passed Homura a spool of string attached to the kind of handle you grip with both hands, and then she headed downwind. Doing as she was told, Homura drew out the string as senpai pulled it with her from the other end.

Touya came over at that point after having finished un-nailing the door.

"Senpai, should I move all our preserved food into the cabin?"

"Yes! Please do!"

Senpai spread out a white cloth that she had been carrying under her arm and swiftly assembled it together with a series of curved metal pipes.

"…Oh, a kite?"

"A kite? That's a kite? Touya-kun, I've never handled a kite before, you know?"

Just as Touya had said, what senpai had spread out before her chest was a small kite.

"Heh, how lucky you are, Hinooka."

"Hah? Are you a little kid?" asked Homura in disbelief.

"You don't have much footing, so be careful! Here we go!"

"Eh, already?"

Senpai suddenly threw the kite into the sky.

Instantly, the kite stretched out the string as it flew horizontally, and then began to ascend as it caught the wind.

"Wawah, so strong!"

Homura was on the verge of being carried away with the kite, but Touya caught her and held her back from behind.

"The string, extend the string!"

"Which part!? Where!?"

"The reel brake, use that!"

Touya's hands overlapped with Homura's fingers to grip the spool of string.

While repeating the process of loosening the string and stopping, loosening the string and stopping, they manipulated the string handle and made the kite run across the sky in a zigzag fashion, gradually making the white kite climb up and grow small from their perspective.

"…Wow."

"…It's already a dot at this point."

As the two of them held their breath and watched the path of the kite, Misasagi-senpai came over to them while looking up at the kite happily.

"It's high enough now. Here, take this."

Saying that, senpai held out a hammer.

Touya hurriedly separated from Homura and accepted it.

"H-Hinooka, don't let go!"

"I got it, don't worry."

Touya then hammered the stake which poked out from the fulcrum of the thread handle into the ground to fix it in place while Homura kept hold of it.

After confirming that the kite was stable, the three of them returned to the cabin.

Inside the cabin, there were two bunk beds and one small desk. It also served as a storehouse for materials such as sleeping bags and food ingredients for emergencies.

"This place is really dreary…"

"Yeah."

Senpai smiled bitterly.

"The wind is also noisy at night, making it hard to sleep."

As she said that, senpai placed the contents of the durable case she had been constantly carrying onto the desk.

"Ah, that's the state secret thing."

"Yes. Thank you for waiting. This is the crux of our mission this time."

It was a lump of wires, coils and miniature light bulbs.

It had been compacted together quite well, but the main parts that Homura could distinguish consisted of telephone receivers and vacuum tubes. This was her first time seeing actual vacuum tubes.

It was clearly some kind of communication device, but even so, it was the size of twenty cellphones.

"This is a wireless transceiver. I made it myself."

"Amazing, you managed to make all this, senpai?"

Misasagi-senpai patted the transceiver in a slightly proud manner.

"I got the blueprints from an expert in Nutellan physical phenomena, but I'm the one who actually constructed it. It's true that it took a lot of effort, but it wasn't that hard to figure out how to make, you know?"

"Haah…"

To Homura, people who could make things like vacuum tubes or portable game devices themselves were beings who existed above the clouds. Yes, speaking of above the clouds—

"Ah, then does the kite act as an antenna?"

"Yes. It's a makeshift antenna."

"Senpai, why did you make all this yourself?"

Misasagi-senpai held out her finger and the Transport Ring on it.

"When transporting, it's difficult to carry over tools whose functioning you don't personally understand, especially complex things like this. Semiconductors don't work properly on Nutella either, so currently this is the best method for making a telephone call here."

She softly put it down on the desk.

"Of course, that's only if it works right—"

Senpai took out another part. It was a hand-powered electric generator. She affixed it to the desk with a clamp and installed the handle.

"This cabin is called a relay base because it lies at the halfway point between our base camp and the base camp of Hiyoshizaka High's Exploration Club."

"I see. But when you say halfway… this is still just the halfway point after coming all this way? It's far, way too far."

"That's why our objective is to make a relay station for radio waves on this mountain ridge and finally make it possible to communicate between base camps."

"I see~. So our mission was to act as the Kansai Electrical Safety Inspection Association♪."

"More like NTT DoCoMo[1]."

"But isn't Hiyo-High only three stations away from Seiran? It shouldn't be that far, even if you walk there."

"That's true on Earth. But at this latitude on Nutella, the straight-line distance between locations is changed to twenty times more than on Earth."

"Twenty times more!? Hiii… Then other schools must be even farther away."

"Yes, they're far… very much so."

Touya sighed while lightly turning the handle of the set-up transceiver and watching its condition.

"Nutella's surface area is also the same as Jupiter's, you know? It's a hundred and twenty times the size of Earth. This much was written on the pamphlet, remember? What are you getting all surprised at now—"

"Wait, please stop, the order of magnitude is getting too big and exaggerated and making my brain overheat."

"It's not an exaggeration."

Either way, Homura felt dizzy at it all.

"It's wonderful that this world is so wide and huge. Now, let's start the communication experiment while the kite is still stable."

Though she said that, Misasagi-senpai herself was the most eager of them all.

"If it works well, we should hear the beacon from Hiyoshizaka High's base camp. They have the same device installed over there as well."

They drew out the antenna wire from the stake used to keep the kite in place and connected it to the transceiver inside the cabin. The kite seemed to be steadily rising, but there was no way to tell what would happen in the afternoon if the weather became rougher.

Touya and Homura took turns rotating the generator.

Once the vacuum tubes warmed up, noise soon began to leak out from the transceiver and the sound of a beacon could be clearly heard.

Puu, pii, puu, pii, puu…

"It worked… This is coming from Hiyo-High's camp, right?"

Touya turned around from clinging to the speaker, and senpai nodded.

"Yes, there's no mistake."

"It's kind, of a, gloomy, sound, though…"

Homura panted as she turned the heavy handle.

"It would, have been, better with, some fanfare… Haaah."

Senpai smiled wryly.

"The camp there is unmanned right now since the members have already gone back to Earth, so this is the best we can do."

"What are they doing for electricity while they're gone?" asked Touya. "Are they using a battery?"

"It should be using water-generated power. Storage batteries deteriorate very quickly. I'd like for us to eventually make an antenna tower and supplement our side with wind-generated power too, but…"

"That's a, long road, ahead! All right, that's hundred turns! Switch!"

"That was fast. Did you really turn it a hundred times?"

Touya clicked his tongue and switched places with Homura for power generation duty.

"At this rate, how long will it take until we can send even a single text or email?"

"It's true that we have a long road ahead. We have to observe the condition of the transceiver next, so please keep working hard a little while longer, Touya-kun."

While senpai checked over the procedure as she looked through the manual, Homura rested her elbows on the desk with the transceiver and listen to the cold and inorganic beacon.

Suddenly, she heard a voice mixed in with the noise from the speaker.

[……cq… cq…]

"—Senpai!? It's talking! I can hear a voice from it!"

"What!? Switch places with me!"

"You're so noisy, Touya-kun! Go on, keep turning it!"

[…CQCQ. This is Hiyoshizaka High's Exploration Club. Please respond—CQCQ, this is Japan Hiyoshizaka High's Explorers[2]…]

The voice over the radio alternated between English and Japanese as it called out for a reply.

They had definitely heard the words 'Hiyoshizaka High'.

[…What… Is it not working…?]

The voice went on to mutter and complain.

Manipulating the transceiver, senpai handed Homura the phone receiver.

Though Homura tried to decline with her eyes, senpai pushed it onto her with a smile.

Giving up, Homura cleared her throat and nervously spoke into the mike.

"T-This is Seiran High's Exploration Club. Over."

[Oh, it worked, the radio signal arrived!]

The person on the other end seemed to be shouting at someone behind her.

The cheers from other members could be faintly heard over the speaker.

Homura's cheeks slightly reddened as she felt as if she were witness to a historic moment.

[Slow! You're so slow, Mayo! You really kept us waiting here!]

"Sorry. W-We got delayed."

[Hmm? You're not Misasagi? A girl? Not Touya-kun, right?]

"Y-Yes. I'm a new club member, Hinooka Homura."

[Ah, the girl who came to my live concert! I see, congratulations on joining the club!]

"Thank you very much—wait, by concert, does that mean you're… Kamikoma-senpai!? The one who played the saxophone?"

[The one and only. I'm Kamikoma Sara, the president of Hiyoshizaka High's Exploration Club. Nice to be working with you from now on!]

That husky voice was unmistakably that of the small-statured female upperclassman who had performed at that live music club along with Kujou Orie.

Other voices trying to name themselves could also be heard as they overlapped over the speaker, but Kamikoma fervently kicked them away.

[I said quiet down and move away, geez, you guys—So, haha, based on your words, did Mayo keep it a secret?]

Misasagi-senpai took over the receiver from Homura.

"This is Hinooka's first mission."

[Ah, Mayo. All right, so you Sei-High guys managed to all safely arrive at the relay camp?]

"Yes. Touya-kun is also here."

Still not relaxing his hand on the handle, Touya moved his head towards the receiver as senpai held it out to him.

"Touya here! Koma-senpai, you guys use water-generated power over there? We're using human power here, you know? It's really tough."

The other end was filled with laughter again.

Homura and the others also wryly laughed along with them.

[Hahaha, keep working hard. Then, until your dear power generator uses up all his strength, how about I do a broadcast about the story of Mayo's berserk rampage at the live music club? This will serve as our commemorative first broadcast—]

"K-Koma-chan!? You can't talk about that, you can't—"

Clinging to the transceiver, senpai showed an open and unguarded expression that Touya and Homura had never seen before.

Both now third-year students, Kamikoma and Misasagi had gone through their school life while deepening friendly relations with each other as fellow members of the Exploration Club.

They had known each other for two years since they had entered high school, or perhaps even longer that that. Homura honestly felt envious of the two of them. And then she suddenly remembered Kujou-san. Even though there had been plenty of chances, Homura still had yet to form any friendship with her.

[Hahaha, well, I'll stop the joking here… The truth is, there's something I have to tell you while the transmission's working. Did anything abnormal happen on your end?]

"……Yes."

Misasagi-senpai briefly recounted the herd of beasts that Homura had encountered last night.

However, she didn't mention the fact that a human-like figure had been seen among them.

[I see… The truth is, we also heard howling over here.]

Homura's eyes widened.

[We also found corresponding footprints. According to one of our guy who's knowledgeable on animals, they apparently belong not to wild dogs, but to wolves. And big ones at that.]

"Wolves…?"

Senpai frowned, but then recomposed herself and continued speaking.

"So you extended your stay here in order to wait and tell us that. Thank you."

[Sure. For now, it's fine as long as you're all okay. I'll pray for your safe return. Depending on the situation, you should also consider doing an emergency withdrawal.]

"Understood. Thank you for sharing your information."

After that, the two club presidents exchanged information about the weather. There were many times when a bad change in the weather at the Hiyoshizaka camp would also spread out and occur at the Seiran camp.

[Then, we'll be going back ahead of you. We'll also inform Fujimori-sensei about this.]

"Yes, please do."

"U-Umm…! About what happened last night…"

Homura suddenly interjected from beside senpai.

[—What's wrong?]

Guessing where Homura's words were heading, Touya chided her sharply in a hushed voice.

"Leave it be. We'll discuss it after we all get back."

"You don't believe it either, do you, Touya-kun? You think I saw a hallucination? But a herd of beasts really did come, you know?"

"I don't know either way. But this isn't something to lightly announce without proof. It's like saying you saw aliens."

"But…"

Sensing the change in atmosphere on their end, Kamikoma also seemed confused.

[…Mayo?]

After sinking into thought while gripping the receiver, Misasagi-senpai finally resolved herself and opened her mouth.

"The truth is—"

[……]

A human might have been seen among the herd.

Misasagi-senpai repeated Homura's words to Kamikoma.

The previously lively Hiyoshizaka club members who were listening in from behind there also fell silent. No one laughed.

Having expected at least teasing cheers if not words of praise, Homura felt completely let down at the anticlimax.

[—If that's true, it's our first contact with a Nutellan.]

Kamikoma strove to respond calmly.

[Mayo, you understand, right?]

"…Yeah."

After watching senpai's depressed expression from the side, Homura realized that she had stepped over the line here.

Senpai handed the receiver back to Homura.

[Hinooka-san—no, is it fine if I call you Homura? I'll explain it so it's easy to understand. This is really bad. News of this won't just be contained in our country. This is information that self-proclaimed good and bad people alike throughout the world will tear out from your throat just to get their hands on it. Even if it's true, this is something you should only tell to people you trust. This of course also has to do with the confidentiality agreement for Exploration Club members, but you can't tell your family either."

"Even my family?"

[Yeah, it's better not to get them dragged into it. I don't think you should tell Fujimori-sensei yet either, but… Well, this is just my opinion. You should discuss it with your club president. Of course, we won't say anything either. That's a promise.]

"Yes… Thank you very much."

[Well, don't worry too much. Just make sure to be careful. It might unexpectedly have been a witch that you saw.]

"A-A witch?"

[Yes. A witch.]

Having completed their mission, Homura and the others began their return journey.

They left the relay camp and headed towards the old castle of the base camp.

The sun had risen up high in the sky and the weather on the mountain ridge path was a bit clearer than yesterday. The speed of the low-hanging clouds moving across the sky was refreshing as well… It was just right for a picnic.

Though the atmosphere among them wasn't gloomy, Homura felt worried by the lack of words between them.

"Umm… I'm sorry for butting in from the side and talking without permission earlier."

She hung her head shamefully as she walked next to senpai down the gentle slope.

Senpai shook her head slightly.

"It's fine. It was a subject that would have been difficult for me to handle on my own. In the end, I actually felt relieved that you shared it with Kamikoma-san. I'm the one who should be apologizing for failing to act as a proper club president. At such a crucial time, I was…"

"No, I didn't think that at all. Senpai, you, umm…"

"……"

She had also intended to apologize to Touya who was walking a bit further ahead, but he remained silent.

"It'd be best if it was just me mistaking what I saw, right? Everyone would be happier that way, right? Ahaha…"

"……"

Senpai made a complicated expression and failed to respond.

"I think we should proactively investigate it, though," Touya murmured.

"Wait, just who are you siding with anyway!?"

Touya turned around with a serious expression.

"You saw it yourself, right? You managed to cut them with a knife?"

"Yes… I should have."

"If that's true, it's really amazing. We don't know who they are, but this discovery is much more significant than searching through graveyards. Because they're actually alive."

"Right, right!?"

"Were they male or female? Were they wearing clothes?"

"…Eh, clothes?"

When she tried to recall, the piercing fear returned in her chest.

Back then, the camp fire had been extinguished, but nights on Nutella were brighter than on Earth.

"I think they were wearing clothes… probably. I don't remember the design, but… they were wearing something like a bracelet."

"Then it wasn't just one of the monkeys."

Homura was taken aback in surprise.

"Ah… Ah~, I didn't consider it might have been a monkey back then… A monkey, huh…"

"Hey, hey, seriously? Well, it's true that mountain dogs and monkeys don't seem to form herds. But we can't say anything for certain about this planet. Well, I was more surprised at your guts for suddenly slashing at an unknown opponent."

"I'm already reflecting on how reckless that was."

Touya dubiously shrugged and then turned to senpai.

"Speaking of which, what was that talk about a witch?"

Homura was also interested in the word that Kamikoma had mentioned at the end of the transmission.

Senpai nodded.

"The [Witch] is like a ghost story passed down among the Exploration club members. When something mysterious happens, we often say that it was the doing of a forest witch. Of course, no one has actually seen the witch."

"A superstition among the Exploration Club? What kind of mysterious events do you mean, for example?"

"They're all silly and childish things, but let me see…."

As they walked, senpai talked about the superstitious beliefs regarding the witch passed down in the Exploration Club.

Examples included unimaginably huge fish washing up against natural dams made of driftwood and rocks, scratch marks that looked just like letters being found on tree trunks, falling stars so bright they illuminated the night sky leaving behind strangely-shaped vapor trails after they passed by…

"It's said that when you meet the witch and are beckoned by her, you won't be able to come back, so make sure to be careful, Touya-kun, Hinooka-san."

"Ahaha, sure, I'll be careful."

"Those who see the witch never come back… is it? If that were true, that kind of rumor wouldn't spread in the first place."

"That's exactly right…" Misasagi-senpai agreed. "But, if there really is a witch, I'd like to meet her."

"……"

"Yeah, me too! I'd like to ask her the trick behind fire magic! Ah, but it'd be a problem if I wouldn't be able to come back, huh?"

"You should just stick to smoke magic. Use it to smoke fish or meat."

"What was that?"

Homura was relieved at the sight of senpai's gentle smile, but that was precisely why she was concerned by the tense face Touya sometimes showed when he looked at senpai.

Just as senpai had said this morning, they walked back while crossing over the river shoals several times and avoiding places where wolves seemed to appear frequently like the campsite last night and where it would be hard to run away should the worst happen.

It was gradual, but Homura became accustomed to Nutella's landscape as well.

Though it was hard to put into words, it was as if she could feel some faint human warmth in parts of the landscape which seemed completely natural and untouched.

They were walking on a slender path that only members of the Exploration Club should have passed through.

However, the biggest boulders along the rough rock face were split in two as if they had been cut apart by a giant axe, lining up into a path and creating a natural sunken road.

The flowers that bloomed as if to decorate a particularly breathtaking spot looked like vestiges of someone having been buried there in search of comfort.

In the far past, someone had walked along this ridge and rested their body while looking at this very same scenery—perhaps it was just a delusion on her part, but thinking that way was wonderful.

Homura had only ever thought of mountains as inconvenient and unpleasant places with no cell phone reception… For her to feel human warmth in them was something that would have been impossible for her until now.

Once they were close to the entrance to the valley leading to the base camp, the three of them took one final break.

Their journey back had been going well, and they had managed to make it this far while there was still quite a bit of time left until evening.

The three of them sat down together on a big fallen tree.

While senpai and Touya conversed together, Homura absentmindedly recalled the events of these past two days, causing her to inadvertently groan and bury her face in her hands.

She kept sinking down until she had her face crammed between her knees.

"What's wrong?"

"It's so embarrassing… I made mistakes again and again. I caused trouble for everyone. Even though it was supposed to be my first mission and debut as part of the Exploration Club. If this were an exam, I'd be getting negative marks…"

"Yeah. You'll be taking supplementary lessons in the club building."

"But you said that the Exploration Club is exempted from supplementary lessons," Homura whined.

Supplementary lessons are necessary. You only get exempted from supplementary exams, Homura-san[3].

While Homura and Touya noisily argued over what had and hadn't been said, senpai murmured with a sigh.

"A mealy primrose's heart, knows the season, and waits for spring."

"…?"

Homura turned to Misasagi-senpai in surprise.

"It's the motto passed down in my family. Everyone goes through hard times. So cheer up."

"Motto…"

"Yes, my family's motto," senpai replied with a nod.

Homura opened her eyes wide in surprise at such a phrase that she had only ever heard in TV dramas before.

"The Misasagi family were originally samurai who received a stipend of 500 koku[4] of rice, but then went through the bitter experience of having it revoked once. The family went through hard times, but later was revived as merchants."

"Senpai's ancestors…"

"Flowers that bloom beneath the snow aren't seen by anyone. But when spring eventually comes, the snow melts. There's never a time when spring doesn't come. Even if the things you do and accomplish don't go well, it's a waste to let your heart wither as well."

Beneath the dim trees, senpai looked at a small flower that was illuminated by sunlight peeking through the branches and leaves.

"There's no need to rush. Homura-san, your good points won't lose their brightness no matter what the time. You're a flower that blooms beneath the snow."

Homura nodded in a moved manner.

"So I'm the best remaining as I am, is what you mean, right?"

"Isn't that wrong? Don't conveniently interpret it."

"…Maybe you should train your body a bit more at least."

Senpai smiled wryly as Homura's eyes glittered excitedly.

After linking arms and forming a circle together in the old castle's basement, Homura and the others managed to safely return home from Nutella with the power of the Transport Ring.

When they suddenly appeared in the transport room, Fujimori was there to greet them as if she had been waiting for them.

"All right, everyone, good work out there! Well done coming back!"

Using a remote control, she halted the flashing lights that signaled an intrusion into the transport room—in other words, the return of the Exploration Club members.

"I heard about the wolves from Koma. You guys went through a lot, but don't sleep in tomorrow."

"…Isn't being late not counted for members of this club?"

"That's our official stance. It's bait to lure in new club members."

"Seriously…? You seem to have been sound asleep, though, sensei."

Touya nonchalantly assessed Fujimori, who had terrible bed hair and visible imprints resembling the patterns from a mattress on her cheeks, but she just defiantly puffed up in pride.

"…Are you okay, Hinooka? Are you suffering from transport sickness?"

As senpai supported her, Homura shook her head with an absentminded look.

"I don't feel so bad… Just, I got hit by weariness and drowsiness the instant we got back… I feel like I went a whole day without sleeping. Sensei, did you contact our homes?"

"I only told them that the *welcome party* went on late, though."

"That's pretty much a bald-faced lie, isn't it?"

"It's not a lie. We did welcome you, right? Keep up the confidentiality agreement!"

In the changing room, Homura sluggishly washed her head several times and somehow managed to change into her school uniform with senpai's help.

Just as she was about to leave, Homura stopped by the illuminated stand-by room and was shocked when she saw the clock on the wall.

Homura's first mission. Her stay on Nutella had amounted to thirty-six hours. That was—only six hours' worth of time on Earth. It was still in the afternoon of the day that she had transported to Nutella.

To be continued.

Chapter 13 END

1 The Kansai Electrical Safety Inspection Association is responsible for ensuring the safe use of electricity in the Kansai region in Japan. NTT DoCoMo is the predominant mobile phone operator in Japan.

2 While the first half of this dialogue is in normal Japanese, the second half of the text is in English, which you can notice from the different phrasing used.

3 To avoid misunderstandings, this part is said by the narrator, not any character.

4 Koku: an old Japanese unit measurement for volume, equivalent to about 280 liters per unit. Back in feudal Japan, 1 koku of rice was considered enough to feed one person for one year.

Commentary, by Nasu Kinoko

Welcome to the world of Hoshizora Meteo.

The adventure surrounding the far off second newly pioneered Eden, the Imaginary Earth Nutella, has finally started.

This work is a classic yet brand-new teen sci-fi novel. Terms like magic filled with sci-fi explanations and new planets appear here, but those are only the backbone of the story.

What lies here is my and your story.

Yearning and fear towards the unknown,

And anticipation and anxiety as you await the future.

The dreams of your pubescent years, which the "you" before you became an adult held,

And the bitter conflicts of your younger days, when "someone" who had become an adult overtook and passed by you.

This is a fragment of your youth which glittered like a star, turning all those things into the power to act.

And this work is also part of the genre that has come to be called light novels in recent years.

The word "light" here doesn't mean "not heavy", but rather that it is "easy for readers to like it", or so I believe. I think that the author, Mr. Hoshizora Meteo, most likely wrote this work with that in mind as well.

Even though it's deep and profound, your steps are light.

The depth is short, but you can't see the bottom of it.

A "warmth" fills this work, which the author Hoshizora Meteo shares as if it were only natural while never bringing it to the forefront.

And the "pioneering" theme here isn't limited to the plot of the story. I hope you all enjoy with a refreshing feeling this book by Hoshizora Meteo, who has developed and evolved even further in his writing.

Then, I will next compose a love letter.

It's embarrassing for an adult like me to speak the words "love letter", but it can't be helped since this is more like a love letter than a commentary. After all, Hoshizora Meteo is one of the great writers who I, Nasu Kinoko, consider my senpai and loved from before he debuted.

I became strongly conscious of Hoshizora Meteo in 2002.

(In truth, I was a fan of his from much earlier on… ever since I played his first true debut game, but whenever I tell Mr. Meteo that, he always says "That's part of my Black History, you know, Nasu-san?" while making an expression like that of a rain-drenched corgi, so I'll omit that here.)

Yes. It was a suspicious-looking work that is no longer even spoken of among Hoshizora Meteo's readers. It was the publication of Liar-soft's +18 game, [Rotten Princess]. Its title, character modelling, world view, background art, and screen production—many people in the Visual Novel business at the time were overwhelmed by [Rotten Princess]. I was also one of those people.

Degenerate and avant-garde.

"A girl in a red kimono that is like a stain upon the world, standing still at the corner of your vision."

Superstition and blind belief.

"A wolf that creeps smoothly through a rustic abandoned village."

A sense of vertigo which interweaves feelings of déjà vu and familiarity.

"A tomorrow you once saw. An ending you once saw. The accumulated rubble of civilization."

The looping ending becomes a sweet poison that both saves and punishes the player.

"The world suddenly rots away due to red snow, as if falling asleep."

At the time, producers of +18 PC Novel Games were conceited, thinking they were at the forefront of Otaku culture. (That culture has moved onto light novels since 2005, but that's another story.)

The writers of great Novel Games were also the directors and supervisors. It wasn't that they had the right to direct their work, but rather that they had no choice but to do that portion of the work as well. In order to make a script for a game, writers had to have a say in all departments.

Due to the budget conditions and the writers being outsourced at times, there were also cases where they "only produced the script". However, games that are considered masterpieces were always made by writers of such brand who both wrote the script and directed the production.

What for?

It's obvious. In order to turn their world view, their mental image, from a "script" into a "game".

Hoshizora Meteo's [Rotten Princess] is a monster born out of such a foundation.

Many of the users who played [Rotten Princess] fell to its beauty. The priority of the name "Hoshizora Meteo" instantly rose in people's evaluations. The beauty of the total balance in his work. His firm world view. His strong will and artistic sense which controlled it all.

"Why did such a person make [Bloomers 2000]!?

No, well, Bloomers was quite great in its own way, though!"

As such voices of surprise permeated among users, Hoshizora Meteo continued dashing forward even further.

The great entertainment race whose stage was set in an entire galaxy, [Cannonball].

The tale of a new inn, illusions and the lives of an adult-like child and a child-like adult, [Forest].

The story of a continental-crossing journey based on Norse myth, [Seven Bridge].

These were records of the yet-to-be-known ace that came out in the golden transitory period, when the +18 PC Game industry flourished the most and continued producing ambitious, masterpiece and suspicious-looking works.

He pre-eminently stood out not just a head above others but rather with his whole height.

Novel Games are different from light novels. Each game is like a painting.

The writers who made interesting scripts in this golden era are too many to count, but I don't think there was any artist who made "perfect paintings" in terms of both visuals and atmosphere as Hoshizora Meteo did.

However—yes, it's precisely because they were such perfect paintings that his works were only talked about among certain people of specific tastes. In short, they had a bit of a high threshold for users. I have now come to believe that it is because Mr. Hoshizora Meteo concentrated on the "meaning and significance of the painting" than "himself" or the "users".

(The most extreme example of this among his works is [Girl's Work], but that's another story as well.)

In the latter half of 2005, Mr. Hoshizora Meteo joined TYPE-MOON.

This person in the same business as me, who had I admired, was truly the intellectual that I had imagined.

Even though his heart is firmer than anyone else'es, he doesn't talk zealously, isn't prejudiced and is deeply understanding.

His text is always filled with prudence, and I, Nasu Kinoko, am overwhelmed every time I read his writing. And at the same time, I can't help being grateful for my good fortune in him having come to the same battlefield as me.

I never knew that having an amazing writer at the same table as me would serve as such a strong encouragement and stimulus.

Even though it makes me understand that I'm still greatly inexperienced, you can't calculate a precise numeric unless you have a ruler of measurement. I was like that up until 2007. If Nasu Kinoko's point of view has changed ever since 2008, it was undoubtedly because Hoshizora Meteo was right beside.

When I read his project [Girl's Work], part of me decided to start afresh from the beginning. No, it really is embarrassing! Meteo Love!

Now then.

Similarly, Hoshizora Meteo has also changed according to the TYPE-MOON style.

The foundation of the works made by TYPE-MOON is "pleasure".

Earlier, I said that Hoshizora Meteo prioritized the "meaning and significance of the painting", but that doesn't mean that he made light of the reader. Instead, I refer to how he focused on where to place the relative importance and gravity of each of his works.

The relative importance and gravity among novels is generally divided into three segments.

The story made for the story's sake.

The story made for one's own sake.

The story made for the reader's sake.

How this balance is dealt with depends on the story's theme.

I felt a weight in the "readers' segment" of [Fire Girl] that has never been present in Meteo's works until now. This is my impression after having read through Hinooka Homura's efforts and accepted it as "This is our story".

Nasu Kinoko synchronized with the depiction of the youth of the normal, lazy high school girl Homura, as if imitating the narrator *** (Note: This symbol is used to block out spoilers.)

When I think back, it was one year ago.

I can still remember how I felt as I ran to tell Meteo-san my impressions after I finished reading it.

"Now then, do you know the true meaning of adventure?"

[Fire Girl] was definitely written with that selling phrase in mind, is what Nasu Kinoko excitedly believed as he headed towards TYPE-MOON's office. All the while thinking, I can't just say "We haaaaave to do it since it's written by Meteo-san!", now can I?

Well, the readers who have read this far have probably already noticed, this commentary isn't for [Fire Girl], but rather for [Hoshizora Meteo].

I still haven't talked much about what kind of person he is, but that's something for the readers who have enjoyed his works to enjoy imagining themselves. Taking this commentary any further would be boorish.

—Well then.

Welcome to Hoshizora Meteo's heart-pounding world. This is a warm teen sci-fi story that combines the macro sci-fi world view and the micro-sized sense of values of a high school girl.

The adventure on Nutella is filled with the many unknowns and adventures that all of us have dreamed of.